



Jeannie Cho Lee

(26th July, 2012 – Adele Wong) One of only a few Masters of Wine in Asia, Jeannie Cho Lee can tell you the difference between a New World cab sauv and a Bordeaux without even looking at the bottle. She's also the best-selling author of two award-winning books on the enjoyment of wine in Asia. She tells Adele Wong how she stays smart and sober while tasting hundreds of wines a day.



I started out as a journalist. My interest in wine went way back to when I was an exchange student from Smith College at Oxford University in the 80s. I got hooked on wine but never really thought of it as a career.

When I arrived in Hong Kong in the beginning of 1994, I was working in various newspaper and editorial positions. Besides the full-time job, I started writing wine articles on the side. And that really just evolved into a career.

There is a much larger variety and selection of wines in Hong Kong now [compared

to two decades ago]. The number of retail shops was really just a handful, and the selections at Wellcome and ParknShop were really quite awful.

The general public just wasn't exposed to it. There were so few places where you could actually enjoy wine. You would have to go to a five-star restaurant. There were very few standalone restaurants that had a good wine list. How could you expect people to have a basic understanding when it just wasn't around? The market was quite niche at the time.

[My book] "Asian Palate" is about all the material I wish I had when I was studying. It looks at the world of wine in a fairly structured way, but tries to understand them alongside the flavors of Asia. I had been thinking about this book for 10 years.

I think that with all the books in the past, when people talked about Chinese cuisine and Asian cuisine, it was so generic. They would say things like, "Chinese food goes really well with gewurztraminer." I would say, "What Chinese food? Which cuisine? Which dish?" That was all that was really written. Or they would say all spicy food goes really well with Alsace wine. The extent of what was written about Asian cuisine and wine was zero, absolutely zero.

As soon as I finished that, I moved on to my next book, "Mastering Wine for the Asian Palate." [When you first learn about wines] you tend to memorize, like cabernet should taste like blackberries, blackcurrant. But when was the last time you really had any blackcurrant? You don't have blackcurrant jelly or preserves as a common thing in Hong Kong and I didn't grow up with it when I was in Korea either. If I said, "Hey, doesn't this wine taste like lemongrass?" You'd think, "Oh yeah, it does."

Honestly, no, [I don't get drunk on the job]. Even on a personal level, I don't do that. I'm partly fortunate because I have high tolerance. Internally I do feel a sense of responsibility because very often I am representing all of Asia. At a lot of very high-profile tastings I'm the only Asian person. Sometimes I'm even the only female. I think that people do have impressions, and as a professional, I don't think it's the right thing to [get drunk on the job]. I was never like that to begin with.

[Being a Master of Wine] used to be one of the professions, especially back in the old days, that had alcoholism issues. It was known. It was part of your job to drink all the time. It's very easy to be dependent and lose control of the situation. I don't think anyone has ever professionally seen me drunk. Actually, personally, too.

I would say there are times when I have to taste over 100 inexpensive, everyday sort of wines, and it can be tedious. If you're tasting bad wine it does become very tiresome. But I tell myself, in any profession that you have, there's gonna be parts of it that you don't like. Fortunately, those parts are probably less than 10 percent of my time. So I really can't complain.

I would say that my definition of a great wine is one that is elegant and offers a lot of flavor, but it doesn't have to be big in terms of proportion and size. I do have lots of respect for wines that are full-bodied and generous, but my preference in general is for subtlety, elegance, finesse over power and balance above anything else. One of the things I really look for is the texture of the wine. I really look for fine, fine tannins, a fine line of acidity in white wines. I look for detail.