

[SAVOR KOREA (16)] Wine and hansik: A natural blend



Jeannie Cho Lee, the first Asian Master of Wine and author of the award-winning book "Asian Palate: Savouring Asian Cuisine and Wine" [Ahn Hoon/The Korea Herald]

The first Asian Master of Wine, Jeannie Cho Lee, promises to turn the spotlight on the East with her new book "Asian Palate: Savouring Asian Cuisine and Wine" (Asset Publishing and Research Ltd., \$98). Dubbed "the first comprehensive book on Asian cuisine and wine" in the book's foreword by "Decanter" consultant editor Steven Spurrier, "Asian Palate" pairs wine with food from 10 Asian cities.

Seoul is one of the featured cities, which means that hansik will benefit from the book's international success; yes, that is correct, international success.

Following its release in November, "Asian Palate" has won the prestigious international "Best in the World Gourmand Award for Matching Wine and Food" and is short-listed under the drink category for the famed British 2009 Andre Simon Food and Drink book awards. According to Lee, "Asian Palate" is also up for several awards in the United States.

"(The book's) first print is almost sold out," Lee said in an interview with The Korea Herald in late January. "We're going into our second print in a few months."

All this bodes well for Korean cuisine, which gets its own chapter in "Asian Palate."

Even better, however, for hansik and for Asian food in general is that Lee has another book on the way, a book that promises to be even more revolutionary than its predecessor.

A companion to "Asian Palate," Lee's upcoming book will be called "Mastering Wine at the Asian Table."

"Mastering Wine' is about introducing a new lexicon for the language of wine," the Korean-born Master of Wine explained. "It's bringing into the

vocabulary of wine description, a way of describing the wines, flavors and everything related to wine using Asian reference points."

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To break it down into layman's terms, Lee will offer up a series of Asian spices, ingredients and dishes as adjectives, so to speak, to be used to describe the taste and scent of wine.

What she proposes is potentially revolutionary because wine experts customarily draw from a somewhat standardized set of terms to describe wine.

For example, Merlot is commonly described as bearing aromas of blackberries and plums, or Cabernet Sauvignon as reminiscent of cassis or blackcurrants. Remember those aroma kits, the little vials bearing scents labeled black pepper, vanilla, peach, etc.?

What about broadening that standard set of aromas to encompass Asian spices and dishes as well?

In essence, this is what Lee is doing: "I'm saying, 'Let's broaden our vocabulary. Let's look at it from a slightly different angle.' Why does it always have to be Western reference points?"

So, will hansik be included?

Lee revealed several ingredients commonly used in Korean cuisine that will be featured in "Mastering Wine."

According to Lee, seaweed will be used to describe Chablis, sesame leaves will be referenced for "minty New World cabernets," green onions for Sauvignon Blanc, jujubes for Cabernet Sauvignon and persimmons for Merlot.

Should Lee's suggestions receive the international seal of approval from top tier wine experts and connoisseurs, then wine lovers the world over will be sniffing and tasting ingredients from Korea and other parts of Asia to broaden their own repertoire. In other words, Asian cuisines like hansik will become a part of the universal language of wine.

Imagine, a prominent wine expert sniffing at say a Cabernet Sauvignon and pronouncing it fruity with an aroma of jujubes, those red dates so often used in classic Korean dishes like galbijjim (braised short ribs) and rice cakes?

The implications are endless and if anyone can pull this off it is someone like Lee.

As a Master of Wine, Lee holds one of the most prestigious titles in the world of wine, conferred upon her by the Institute of Masters of Wine. The Master of Wine accreditation has only been awarded to a mere 279. To understand how difficult it is to earn the initials MW at

the back of one's name, it is best to explain that currently less than 300 people since the examination was first held over 50 years ago can claim this title, one of whom is the famed British wine expert Jancis Robinson.

Lee is also the Founder and Director of the wine consulting and education company GrapeXpectations Asia Ltd., a wine consultant for Singapore Airlines and a co-founder of The Fine Wine School in Hong Kong. She writes for prominent publications like "Wine Spectator" and "Decanter." Last year, she was awarded the Vinitaly International Award.

In other words she holds an endless array of credentials and is a member of the *creme de la creme* of the wine world. Add to that her own extensive knowledge of Asian cuisine - she was born in Korea and currently resides in Hong Kong - and you have a wine expert who is more than up to the task of introducing Asian spices, ingredients and dishes into the lexicon of wine.

In fact, her knowledge of Asian food came in handy over the 17 years during which she kept a wine-centric food and wine journal.

"In it every time I smelt something that wasn't in a typical wine lingo or lexicon because it's just not used in the industry I still wrote it down for myself because it means something to me," the 41-year old wine expert said.

That may change after "Mastering Wine" hits the presses sometime this or next year.