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THE WINE MASTER

JEANNIE CHO LEE EXPLAINS
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“WINES FROM CHINA ARE GETTING BETTER AND BETTER”

There has never been a strong wine tradition in China, but this is starting to change. In this interview, Jeannie Cho Lee, Galaxy Macau's master of wine, explains wine consumption patterns in the mainland, the regional preferences and her experience in the field

By Luciana Leitão

When did you first become interested in wine?

When I was 19 years old. I was an exchange student at Oxford University and I went to formal dinners where I was served different wines. You would have, typically, three or four different wines. Some of them were wines that the college had purchased a long time ago – older Bordeaux, some with very high quality.

I had tasted wine before, but it was really only when I started to taste very good quality wine that I began to realise it was a really fascinating beverage.

During that year, as I was travelling to different countries in Europe and understanding that wine was like a condiment or a normal part of any meal, I started studying it more.

How about professionally?

It was much more recently, because I really didn't pursue the wine industry as a profession. I got interested in wine as a writer, and started to do a lot of freelance wine articles. My first wine article was in 1994, in Hong Kong. Actually, my first few articles on wine were for the South China Morning Post and I also wrote for The Far Eastern Economic Review magazine.

Then, I worked for a few years in Malaysia – first as a journalist, then as editor of a weekend magazine where I started to write a weekly wine column, starting from 1996.

Over the years, have you noticed any big differences in the way Chinese consume wine?

Absolutely. In fact, the reason why I didn't become a full time wine writer was because there wasn't enough work. No one was interested in reading about wine and this has changed dramatically over the last five to ten years.

When I arrived [in Hong Kong], I was writing business articles and writing about everything else, but wine. Even though I wanted to write about wine, there just wasn't enough interest. Almost from day to night, there has been a huge change in attitude.

Wine has definitely become very trendy; it's something that a lot of people have embraced, whereas in the early 1990s only a small community had.

I think the way you can tell is by looking at Macau and Hong Kong supermarkets. Before there was hardly any wine there and now there is a huge section devoted to it.

What kinds of wines are Chinese drinking?

It goes into different categories, mainly because of their budget. Someone who is buying in a supermarket is probably looking for good value wines under HK\$300 or HK\$400 a bottle. There, you have a lot of choices - Chile, Argentina and France are always popular.

At that price level, people are trying to get good value [for money], but are still going mostly for reds. Whether you are at a large supermarket like Carrefour, in the mainland, or in ParknShop here, people who are buying off the supermarket shelves probably look for value [for money], and then where the wine is from and whether it is red or white.

If that is what you are looking at, still the largest volume is French [wine]. Australian reds are number two in the market in Hong Kong and in the mainland. If you are looking for fine wine over HK\$800 or HK\$1,000, it ends up being predominantly French. There still is a really [strong] attraction and luxury status associated with the very best French wines.

How about in Macau, do you see a different pattern of wine consumption compared to Hong Kong and the mainland?

In Macau, when people are looking for everyday drinking wine, good value, instead of going for Australia, Chile or Argentina, they are going for Portugal. In Macau, there is a strong support and community of Portuguese red wine consumers that is different from other markets.

But wine consumption in the mainland is still in a beginning stage, particularly when compared to Western countries.

I would say so. If you compare a region with hundreds of years of history with [one that has] 20 years, of course there is a huge difference. But we are also catching up very quickly.

There is [now] a huge difference in the way information is communicated and the whole globalization of the world means that we have very easy access to goods and products we may be



curious about, as compared to before. All that means that we will probably get there quicker than the Europeans did, but definitely our region is very new to wine. At most, [we are in] the second generation of serious wine drinkers.

What is the right way to present wine suited to the Asian palate?

Even though I wrote a whole book about it [called "Asian Palate"], to really understand the Asian palate is a complex thing. It has a lot to do with our dining culture; it has also a lot to do with which part of Asia and so forth. What may work in one part of Asia may not work in another. So, understanding what the Asian palate wants is something that we are still discovering.

With my book I tried to better define the Asian palate. My conclusion it is that it is very regionally based. If you're living in Sichuan province, your palate is going to be very different because of the food you eat there.

The only thing we know for sure in terms of what the Asian palate prefers right now is that we like red. And there is a strong preference for reds from France. We still don't know for sure if it is because people prefer the taste of red wine, like Bordeaux, or if it is just because French wines have been marketed longer and have done a better job at promotion.

I think it is something we won't discover until we do some serious market research.

You are the master of wine at Galaxy Macau. Given that it is so difficult to assess what Asians really like, how do you choose the best wines?

There are general principles that can be used as guidelines; and we know that there are certain ingredients that don't work so well with wine. For example, if the food has a lot of vinegar we know it 'fights' with wine – it's an understood and accepted concept. We also know that if you have a lot of chilli in the meal, it can really kill the wine flavour; more refreshing wines, such as

those with higher acidity work better with really spicy food.

The goal, when you introduce the wine, is to make sure it doesn't kill the flavours of the food. On the other hand, you also want that the food doesn't completely kill the wine; you want to appreciate the wine flavours. You want to keep the integrity of both present.

[Here are] some of the basic principles within Galaxy Macau: [Let's think of] Terrazza, the Mediterranean restaurant – almost all Mediterranean wines will work well there. Another guideline is that a lot of the customers are coming from the mainland and we know that they like quite a lot of different styles of red. So, we have a lot of that on the menu.

Because there are a lot of Asian restaurants at Galaxy Macau – especially Chinese restaurants – we want a selection of wines from China, wines from different parts of Asia, because of the concept "local food goes with local wine". We know that the best wines from China are getting better and better and these will work with local dishes.

I have identified the grape variety Pinot Noir as very versatile. When you have spices and all those interesting flavours, you really want to have a wine that doesn't change that flavour and doesn't fight against it. To me, Pinot Noir is the red grape variety that works the best. It doesn't really have high tannins – those can affect a lot of flavours from different parts of Asia, such as India, or influence the seasonings used. That is why I have made sure that we have a huge selection, with 88 Pinot Noirs from around the world – it is probably one of the biggest selections in Asia.

On Galaxy Macau's wine list, where do the majority of wines come from?

Mainly from the mainland, just by sheer size and also proximity. We are closest to the mainland and they are one of the top ten producers of wine in the world now. Chinese are producing a lot more wine than Thailand or Japan and we will continue to build on and increase our selection.



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A LIFE DEVOTED TO WINE

Born in Seoul, Jeannie Cho Lee moved shortly after to the United States, where she received her undergraduate degree from Smith College and a Masters in Public Policy from Harvard University.

Based in Hong Kong since 1994, she started writing as a business journalist in Asia, writing for Asia Inc, Far Eastern Economic Review and The Asset. Furthermore, she started writing wine reviews for publications such as Wine Spectator, The World of Fine Wine, Wine and Dine, Wine Business International and La Revue du Vin de France, having become the Asian contributing editor of Decanter.

Three years ago, Ms Lee became the first ethnic Asian to achieve the title of Master of Wine from the Institute of Masters of Wine in the United Kingdom, generally regarded in the wine industry as one of the highest standards of professional knowledge. She is a frequent judge at international wine competitions and also teaches wine courses.

In November 2009, Ms Lee launched her first book called "Asian Palate"; one year later she created a website with the same name. The book won first prize in the "Wine, Spirits & Beer" category of the 2011 International Association of Culinary Professionals Cookbook Awards, one of the most prestigious cookbook awards in the world. It also won the 2009 Gourmand World Cookbook Award for "Best Book on Matching Food and Wine in the World" against nearly 6,000 other books from 136 countries.

Recently, she launched her second book called "Mastering Wine for the Asian Palate".