

Explore Wine with a True Expert

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A wizard when it comes to grapes, Jeannie Cho Lee is conducting a seminar in Bangkok next week

To become a master of wine, the candidate needs qualities as unique as a premier-growth Bordeaux. The title was created in 1953 as the benchmark of excellence of those actively trading in the UK's wine industry. From the first examination, only 30 per cent of the hopefuls reach the required level.

TV personality and wine writer Jancis Robinson became the first non-trade master of wine when the Institute of Masters of Wine rules of eligibility changed in 1984, allowing wine makers and wine journalists to take the challenging exam. It wasn't until 2008 that an Asian, another female wine writer, South Korea-born Jeannie Cho Lee, who has lived in Hong Kong since 1994, made the grade.

The master's examination tests candidates' understanding of the international industry and their breadth of wine knowledge, with an emphasis on analytical skills, clarity of communication and the overall business of wine. Candidates must study at the institute for two years before being allowed to even take the exam.

The examination is in three parts - theory, practical and thesis. The theory section alone is 12 hours of written essays on viticulture, winemaking, the business of wine and contemporary issues. The practical

involves three 12-wine blind tastings, each lasting more than two hours, to determine variety, origin, winemaking, quality and style. Additional written work is also part of the practical section. Everything must be done in English, regardless of your native language.

The final section is a 10,000-word original thesis, with the topic selected by the candidate and approved by the institute. For the talented few who pass all three parts, membership into the institute is granted and the title of Master of Wine is given.

Interestingly, Lee's path to that status started in the UK during her junior year at Oxford University, before she returned to Smith College, where she graduated with a dual degree in political science and sociology. She then obtained a master's degree from Harvard University. She is a certified educator in Britain's Wine & Spirits Education Trust and a certified wine educator (CWE) for the US Society of Wine Educators. She had to do an awful lot of studying and hard work before she achieved her goal of becoming a Master of Wine.

But it's paid off, since she is now contributing editor for Decanter UK and a columnist for China Business News, Noblesse, Wine Guangzhou & Wine Press. She is also a consultant for Singapore Airlines and the Galaxy Macau.

Lee is the author of the award-winning book "Asian Palate" and founded www.AsianPalate.com, a site celebrating Asian food and wine that publishes her reviews and other articles. Lee is currently professor of wine at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and co-chairperson of the Decanter Asia Wine Awards.

She has a Certificate de Cuisine from Cordon Bleu and has written about food and reviewed restaurants since 1995. In 2009 Lee won the Vinitaly Award for her contributions to the industry and in 2010 became the face of an Estee Lauder product sold in Hong Kong and China.

Lee will be in Bangkok on Thursday to conduct a master-of-wine seminar, "The Perfect Encounter: Asian Palate & Wines of the World" at the Conrad Bangkok at 2pm, organised by wineglass producer Lucaris, a sponsor of Thailand's Best Sommelier Competition 2013. To reserve a seat, email thanitchai@oceanglass.com.