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Out of the Box

The first Asian Master of Wine, JEANNIE CHO LEE has launched a book and a website to champion understanding of wine pairing with Asian cuisine. CHRISTINA KO examines a pioneering life

IT'S BEEN OVER a decade since Jeannie Cho Lee was drunk. To some, this might sound like a lie; to others, a waste of being the first Asian to successfully attain the Master of Wine qualification. But just because she doesn't knock back more than she can handle, doesn't mean she doesn't enjoy wine any more. It's part of her job to taste anywhere from 50 to 250 bottles of wine in a day's session – oh what a life – and even though it's the law of the oenophile to sip and spit, she wouldn't have it any other way.

“Part of being a wine professional, you never really drink, especially in a professional setting. Even when I'm at home when nobody is watching, I spit, and my kids say, “Mom, that's disgusting, you're spitting it out?” I have this cup for spitting, but if I really like something I'll have a glass or two with dinner. It's the only way to pass a quality judgment on something,” she says. “You can't do it while you're drunk.”

Two hundred-plus wines tasted a day, even with extensive holidays, adds up to a whole lot of wine notes just for personal use. That's why, shortly after earning her Master of Wine in 2008, Lee decided firstly to write a book, then to launch a website, both of which are titled *Asian Palate*. The book, a food and wine-pairing tome, was released at the end of last year and three months later was named Best Food and Wine Pairing Book in the World by the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards.

Not too shabby for a first-time author. Although, strictly speaking, Lee has been writing for many years. Born in Korea but raised in the US from the age of eight, Lee grew up in a predominantly white and Jewish neighbourhood in Long Island before taking a degree in political science and sociology at Smith College. She followed up with a master's from Harvard University, also in the domain of political science, but spent her down time pursuing another passion.

“I loved wine, but it was a hobby or passion,” she says. “But I loved food just as much. So both those areas were just my ‘thing.’ People would say, ‘Oh Jeannie, she's a foodie, she spends all her money on the best restaurants in Boston.’ Or when I travelled to even New York one summer, I decided I had to eat at every single top-rated Zagat [food guide] restaurant.

“After two years I was actually going on to do my PhD, but decided to get some work experience first. And this was all in the area of political science. I did a short stint at



the United Nations; I worked at the Korean Embassy for a while. So my profession was one area, and wine and food was just a love. They were going in parallel, but I never really thought of it that way, because when you have a hobby, you never think it's going to turn into a profession."

It wasn't until much later, after she fell in love with her husband (whom she met while doing a wine course), moved to Hong Kong and became a freelance writer for publications such as *Asia Inc* and *Far Eastern Economic Journal* that the opportunity came knocking.

"They were needing more stories on lifestyle," she says. "So instead of writing for the political and business sections, which I was doing in the past, because they knew I was crazy about food and wine, they said, 'Okay Jeannie, we need more lifestyle stories, why don't you do that?' And I slowly transitioned from a business writer to a food and wine writer. By the time it was '97, which is when my daughter was born, I was kind of a full-fledged lifestyle writer" – a full-fledged lifestyle writer contributing to publications such as *Wine Spectator* and *Decanter*.

The next few years was a blur of babies over booze. "An intense period of motherhood" is how Lee terms it, and even though she didn't undertake further wine studies until her youngest children were two, she did keep writing about wine (and tasting where necessary), even while giving birth to four children in five years. She applied to do the Master of Wine course in 2001, when her twins were born, but didn't start the course in earnest until 2003.

It was 2008 when she achieved the qualification, which entailed a difficult four-day exam (which she passed in 2007) and a more difficult original research dissertation. When she passed the exam, she already knew she'd be the first ethnically Asian Master of Wine. Two others in Asia beat her to the title – both female Caucasian Americans who call Asia home – but she insists there isn't competition.

"Wine in general is growing so much," she says, "there's room for a lot more people. In fact, I feel like there isn't enough. But if others feel competitive...well, I feel like there's too much work on my plate now anyway, and anything else that other Masters of Wine do is actually beneficial to the entire industry. I think that the more, the better in Asia; there's a real need for it."

These days, Lee would rather spend her time focusing on her books and website. Even though both projects have launched, there's still work to be done. "I'm working on my second book right now. What's wrong with me?" she

laughs. "My second book is about 80 percent finished, hopefully by the end of the year it will be ready to be launched. I wanted [*Asian Palate*] to be a much more comprehensive, thicker book – about 500 pages – but they decided it was already too heavy."

What differentiates *Asian Palate* from the other wine-pairing books is its focus on Asian cuisines. Wine-pairing is so finely nuanced in other parts of the world, that Lee was surprised to find little to no literature available on wine-pairing for Asian cuisines, and where recommendations were made, the generalisations were sweeping (to the tune of "white wine goes great with Chinese cuisine," period.)

As for the website, that was a project that arose rather organically. "Books were my original intent," says Lee. "The way the website came about was that I finally looked at



all my wine notes for the past 20 years. I had 20,000 wine notes, so I was going to write a comprehensive tasting wine book, but most people felt the best medium for that kind of rich content, that database, was really a website.

"All the publishers said, 'You have a lot of good book ideas. But this is a website.' I knew how much work a website would be, so I delayed it. I paid someone, and it took someone 18 months part time to transcribe my wine notes, and then they still needed to be cleaned up. Cleaning that up took about six months and we're still not ready, and only 10,000 notes are up on the site," she says.

Thousands of these notes are searchable in a free database on AsianPalate.com, while the rest of them (premium wines and auction finds) are available to paid subscribers. The paid route is necessary, she suggests, because it's the industry standard: "Otherwise, it's almost like saying what we have out of Asia is not as valuable as the US and UK critics' assessments of the wines."

But of course it is, otherwise there wouldn't be value in naming a book or site "Asian Palate," a title that might be considered exclusionary to other cultures. "There's just as much curiosity in France and the US about what the Asian palate is. What sort of appreciation do we have for wine, and what are the flavours of Asian food? And how do those go together? That kind of need to know, need to understand, is just as high. Just because it's called *Asian Palate*, is that

exclusive? I live in Hong Kong but I'm not Cantonese, I haven't lived in Korea since I was eight years old, so I'm not 'Korean' either. So I feel like a part of the whole Asian community, but just not rooted in one place."

At the end of the day, though, she's not trying to break down cultural divides or make a statement about the representation of Asians in the wine world. "I'm still a working wine professional," she says. "And I never want to lose sight of the fact that it's the enjoyment of communicating about wine that's the essence of what I've always been doing."

And if there's one thing to take away from a session with Lee, it's that no matter what the tasting notes may direct you to buy, the most important factor isn't cost or provenance – it's mood. "I would say all my best memories are not of a wine itself, but the wine in context – I've had a 1900 Lafite in these formal, serious tastings, and they don't promote the same emotional memory trigger as something as basic as an '05 Bannockburn pinot noir, which we've

been drinking a lot when people come over, as our house wine."

So really, it makes sense that Lee has given up on getting drunk. The key to enjoyment, after all, is mood, not inebriation (and after 20 years of wine, the lure of forgotten nights has surely ebbed). But that doesn't mean she's so high and mighty that you won't catch her indulging in a glass or two of boxed wine...

"Yes! On a boat!" she laughs. "They're actually making decent boxed wine in Australia and Southern France. And you're drinking for mood – in that setting, I think it's absolutely in context and appropriate, and could be quite good." ■