



Interview with Master of Wine Jeannie Cho Lee



Occupation: Wine Master
Based in: Hong Kong
Education: Harvard University

Regarded as one of Asia's preeminent authorities on wine, Jeannie Cho Lee was the first Asian to be awarded the coveted title of Master of Wine from the prestigious Institute of Masters of Wine. Jeannie was born in Seoul, Korea but has resided in many diverse cultural cities around the world such as New York, London, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur. Her interest in wine began at Oxford University where she spent her junior year before graduating with a double degree in government and sociology at Smith College. Jeannie is also the founder of the AsianPalate.com, which celebrates authentic Asian cuisine while pairing it with the elegance of wine. She has long been associated with luxury products around the world and has a vast network of contacts in the food and wine industry. With her expert knowledge, Jeannie has been much sought after and consulted for top hospitality companies. When she is not busy advising on wine and cuisine, you might find her playing golf and writing fiction.

Read about Jeannie's favorite restaurant picks in Hong Kong with the upcoming launch of the Privy 5 Hong Kong Guide. But for now, check out her interview with Privy.

- 1) What does it mean to you to be the first Asian to be anointed the title of Master of Wine?

The significance of it was something I had to get used to. It means that often I am representing Asians at high profile tastings, competitions, conferences, etc so I do feel a sense of responsibility. For many people who have never seen Asian faces in such high end wine events, I want them to remember that Asian wine professionals are very knowledgeable, hard-working, well-travelled, great tasters and communicators even if our wine culture is very young.

2) Can you tell us about Asian Palate?

It started out as the name of my first book then evolved into a website and then a movement to define 'What is the Asian Palate?'. I ask this question knowing that there is no answer at the moment. I also ask the question well aware that the term is fairly generic (like a European Palate or an American Palate). However, I do think the concept breeds discussion and interesting commentary because we have yet to try to understand or define what the Asian Palate is all about. This is especially the case when it comes to wine. Do we know what wines we like/prefer versus what others tell us is good/bad? Should we not question how our palate and preferences might differ because of our unique dining and food culture? Asian Palate is a journey of discovering our tastes which will be different by country, region and by person within Asia. By asking ourselves what is the Asian Palate, we can begin the journey of discovering what taste combinations turn us on and what work for us.

3) You lead such an interesting career in the wine industry, did you always know this was something you wanted to do? Since when?

I fell into this industry organically and I never dreamt that I would have such an exciting career just communicating and commenting on wine. I have been writing about wine since 1996 but no one needed/wanted a full time wine writer in Asia at that time. I am constantly telling people that I feel lucky and a good friend said to me, "Luck is when years of hard work meets opportunity." I guess I would have to agree that I did work very hard studying for the wine exam and writing diligently about wine for years, making very little money and generating only mild interest. All of this changed about five years ago in Hong Kong and I happened to be there to catch the wave.

4) You get to wine and dine at some of the most spectacular places in the world, it sounds almost too good to be true. Is there a catch?

The only catch might be an expanding waist line but fortunately for me, I am blessed with good genes and I don't have to worry about my weight. Drinking requires eating and I never drink without food so that is a concern. My husband always jokes that when I reach 50, I will have to change my voracious eating habits. Also when tasting great wine, such as at chateaux dinners, I refrain from drinking since I want to be sober to enjoy the very last wine and be fair to it when I write up notes. So very often I find myself being the only sober person and the one going home to write down my thoughts about the wine as soon as dinner is over so that the words and flavours are fresh in my mind.

5) Do you have any Asian food and wine need-to-know tips for our many Asian readers?

Remember that spicy food accentuates tannins and vice versa - so if you love chill, then go for the full bodied red but if you don't, then reach for something cool and refreshing to cool down your tongue. In general, refreshing fruity wines work better with most flavourful dishes than fat, warm-climate oaky styles.

6) As someone who writes about cuisine from places around the globe, what are some of your absolute favourite restaurants?

I have so many that it would require a book to record them all. To start with in Asia I love Kikunoi in Kyoto, Jiro Sushi in Ginza, Waigu Kaiseki in Hong Kong, Lung King Heen in HK, Lei Garden in Wanchai in HK, Robuchon in Macau (love their wine list!), Chez Georges in Paris, Le Cinq in Paris, Benu in San Francisco, Daniel in NYC & Marea in NYC...the list can go on and on so I will stop here.

7) Asia is not historically known for pairing food and wine but is beginning to warm to the idea. What do you think is necessary to establish a more wine-centric culture?

It requires the confidence to drink wine with our everyday food. We need to stop thinking that wine is a borrowed/foreign product or that it is only for formal/special occasions. We need to make it a part of our eating/dining culture. We have embraced beer so why not wine?





You can purchase Jeannie Cho Lee's "Mastering Wine for the Asian Palate" and "Asian Palate" at [Asian Palate Offerings site \(click here\)](#).