



Wines to Pair with Asian Fusion Cuisine



(July 2012 – Julie Pegg, RFT Wine Editor) What wine goes with this Asian dish?

Few wine experts explain the workings of pairing wine with Asian flavors, and in such detail, as Jeannie Cho Lee, Asia's first Master of Wine. Korean born, U.S.-educated (Smith, Harvard), and Hong-Kong based, Lee has garnered three major awards for her food and wine-pairing book Asian Palate. Less than a month after veteran wine-maker Johannes Selbach from Weingut Selbach-Oster made his annual visit to Vancouver, Cho Lee whipped through town on her national tour to promote her 50-page booklet called Perfect Pairings; German Wines & Asian Flavours. (Flavors spelled with a "u")

Lunch was at the Bao Bei, owned by chic, 35-year-old Tannis Ling. Dishes here are modern Chinese, tapas-sized, zesty and distinct. Chinese spices are tweaked with those from of Korea, Japan, and India. It is an excellent place to pair Asian flavors with German wines. In addition to five Rieslings from trocken to Auslese,

we sampled a Riesling sekt (German for bubbly), a Pinot Blanc, and two Pinot Noirs.

Who knew you could successfully pair German Pinot Noir with Asian food? With less oak, softer tannins, and higher acid than its U.S. cousins, German Pinot Noir is, in fact, becoming quite trendy with Asian cuisines.

(Note: In Germany Pinot Blanc is called Weissburgunder. Pinot Noir is Spatburgunder— but most wines are labeled these days with the more familiar names of the grapes.)



German wines pair surprisingly well with Asian dishes.

The articulate and well-traveled Lee addressed the challenges of putting wine on the Asian table. She talked about Asian cuisines' multifaceted flavors and textures, the diversity of regional ingredients, and even how Asian custom influences wine selection. For instance, some Asians pair expensive Bordeaux with shark fin soup to show generosity and prosperity. However, due to the environmental damaging aspects of using sharks fins, it's a custom that's shunned in Western culture.

All the information and cultural insights were interesting, but where Lee really had me was with "roving chopsticks."

"Dishes in Asia often land on the table at the same time," Lee explained. "We dip chopsticks into this dish then that one. We pick up a bit of this, and bit of that. No two bites taste the same."

That kind of flavor diversity in the same meal can present issues in trying to match the right wines. However, possibly because I am such a klutz at picking up food with two skinny lengths of wood and often resort to a fork, this conundrum had not occurred to me until Lee pointed it out.



Wine expert Jeannie Cho Lee maybe the foremost expert on pairing Asian dishes with wine.

She suggested choosing a wine that will go with 60-70 per cent of the dishes. “We are not too concerned about an ideal match.”

So I let my chopsticks do the walking. The Rieslings were trump with most dishes. They bridged the main ingredient on the plate with Bao Bei’s liberal use of Asian garnishes—garlic chips, pickled red onion, peanuts, jade radish, shimeji mushroom, and Chinese chive.

Crunch and sparkle hit the palate with a nibble of Chinese pickle and a sip of Dr. Loosen Riesling Sekt. A splendid dish of cold soft tofu spiked with black bean, green Sichuan peppercorns, ground pork, garlic chips, and jade radish was a true marriage with a the melon laden, top-drawer Kruger Rumpff Nahe Pinot Blanc ‘09. And a zippy Weingut Tesch Laubenheimer Karthäuser Nahe Riesling trocken ‘09 fared brilliantly with bits of the pork and black bean.

In Schloss Reinhartshausen Rheingau ‘06 Pinot Noir, black tea and peppery notes were a natural match for crispy pork belly in light anise tomato sauce. Lotus root with a hint of curry went better with a smoky Peter & Peter Pinot Noir Pfalz ‘09.



Crispy pork belly with anise tomato sauced paired perfectly with a German Pinot Noir.

Meanwhile, Weingut Jakoby-Mathy Kinheimer Rosenberg Kabinett (surprisingly!) had enough sugar to hold up to Chinese donuts (Youtiao) dipped in condensed milk caramel.

Today, more young sommeliers, chefs, and restaurateurs like Bao Bei's Ling are partnering Oriental foods with wine and not just German varietals, but fruity Chenin Blanc, Viognier, roses, and white and red Burgundies.

The Pacific Northwest also produces lovely bubble, fruity Riesling, rich pinot noir, and one of my favorite B.C. wines—Pinot Blanc. All of these are lovely matches for East-meets-West recipes. However, New World wines may overwhelm the exotic spices of Asian cuisines with high alcohol levels and assertive tannins. Keeping that in mind you should do fine finding the right wines.

And, if all else fails, there's always German riesling.