

Some chilis with your cabernet? In Asia, sure

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TOKYO (Reuters) - What wine should be drunk with a spicy, silky green Thai curry, accompany a Korean stew laden with fiery chili and garlic, or, perhaps, a delicate sliver of raw sea bream dipped ever-so-lightly into soy sauce?

As economic growth brings more Asians into the middle class and the ranks of wine-lovers, sampling the fruits of the vine -- mainly for prestige -- has become more widespread, purely as something to drink because it tastes good.

But the question of pairing with food is far less pressing than for wine devotees in places with a longer history of wine drinking, said Jeannie Cho Lee, a Hong Kong-based wine expert and author of "Mastering Wine for the Asian Palate."



"The reality of how people drink wine and enjoy it is very casually, without a pairing concept in mind," she said in a telephone interview.

"But if you really want to show off a wine, you obviously don't want a food that kills it. If you are presenting some exquisite delicacy and you want to show off that dish, or a particular special meal, you won't want to choose a wine to spoil that."

This means taking into account personal tastes and tolerance levels for basic Asian flavors such as the spice of chili, the savory tang of umami present in soy sauce.

"Umami as an ingredient in general -- it really brings out the depth of dark berry flavors, it also brings out any leather or mushroom notes in the wine," she said.

"If the chef gives you the soy dip to use with your (raw) fish, it's probably going to taste better if you have it with a Pinot Noir, with a bit of tannins, a bit of depth and spices and herb notes, because there are gentle layers of flavors."

Thai curries with both coconut milk and spice, such as a green curry, are a relatively simple match with Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon blended wines -- a combination of roundness, depth and crispness. With chilis, Lee recommends a red wine with enough fruit to stand up to the chilies and their strong heat.

"Chili has, I would say, a very confrontational effect with tannins. When you have tannins and chili together, they accentuate each other," she said.

"When you have a tannic red wine, the burn in your mouth will go on twice as long. And the chili strips away the fruit character of the red wine, and the structure of the wine, which are the tannins and acidity, becomes more exaggerated."

One real killer, she warns, is anything pungent and fishy, such as Southeast Asian fish sauce, even more pungent shrimp paste, dried anchovies or dried salted cuttlefish, a popular snack in East Asia.

"You end up killing all the flavor in the wine and you're left with a kind of metallic taste, which doesn't make that food taste good," she said.

"If you still want to drink wine, I'd say that's fine -- just drink cheap wine with plenty of fruit that has not much subtlety, because you'll miss it all."

RED DATES, MANGOSTEENS

The growing interest in wine drinking has also sparked a growing desire to study it seriously. But many Asians are unfamiliar with classic descriptors for wine flavors.

"Like black currant, we never had that, or brioche, or bready, yeasty flavors. So I had to improvise when I was teaching, trying to use descriptors of ingredients that were really familiar," she said.

For Cabernet Sauvignon, where the classic descriptors for fruit flavors would include black currants or dark cherries, Lee substitutes fresh Chinese red dates. Sauvignon Blancs produced in Bordeaux have flavors that include lemongrass, star fruit and mangosteens.

In the end, fundamental differences in how Asians eat -- with a large number of dishes shared by all the diners, and historically no habit of drinking a beverage with the meal -- mean wine doesn't have to match every bite.

"When you're in a family communal dining environment, you have seven different dishes and a bowl of rice, you sort of dip in and out. The other thing is that we don't really repeat every flavor," she said.

"I think that's okay if it (wine) doesn't go with that particular anchovy dish or that stinky soybean, stinky tofu dish. When you're eating that, don't take a drink of wine. Just wait until the next bite."

(Editing by Patricia Reaney)

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