



### Viewpoint: Asia's evolving taste for wine

**(3<sup>rd</sup> of May, 2012 – Reposted by Marc Jardine)** This is a fascinating article by Jeannie Cho Lee MW, one of my favourite wine writers, who offers us an insight into the difficulties presented by wine-pairing for South East Asian cuisine. No-one's suggesting it was ever as simple as the often quoted "red with meat and white with seafood" but it's a more complicated equation than with Western food: not only does the cuisine differ widely from one region to the next, but also the perception of flavour differs too, and texture plays a big role too.



Asia is a continent of self-professed foodies.

If you look at the eating habits of local Singaporeans, Koreans, Japanese, Shanghainese, Taiwanese, Thai or Hong Kong Chinese, we have one thing in common: we eat all day.

Xiao chi (snacks) found on nearly every street corner in the busy culinary capitals of Asia are our soul food.

The steamed dumplings in the bamboo steamers, the white buns stuffed with sweet red beans or savoury pork or chicken, and the fish cakes on skewers which vary little whether they are enjoyed in Seoul, Tokyo or Hong Kong.

We eat relatively small meals but we like to eat often and most importantly, we live to eat.

This is the context into which wine has been introduced, vying for attention amid the rich culinary traditions of Asia.

As a result, is it really so surprising that most Asians reach for wine only when they are enjoying the less complicated, simpler flavours of Western meals?

And yet, despite this seeming incompatibility, Asia is well on its way to becoming the world's biggest wine market, with a fast-growing number of consumers only too happy to try to find their perfect bottle.

So what is happening; are Asia's tastes changing?

Firstly, any generalisation about the Asian palate for wine is bound to be an over-simplification.

However, from my research across 10 major Asian cities, exploring and understanding the dining culture and flavour profile of the different cuisines, I made some interesting discoveries.

### **Taste correlations**



While Asia's tea-drinking culture may be one way to understand the level of tannins and bitterness that a region or culture may prefer, it does not always translate into a preference for tannic red wines.

Black tea is preferred in southern China, but there is no correlation with a preference for tannic red wines in regions like Guangdong and Hong Kong.

Instead, there is a link between cuisines that have many bitter root vegetables in their diet and the preference for fuller-bodied tannic wines.

In Korea, for example, bitter mountain vegetables and ginseng roots are part of a normal diet and there is a noticeable high tolerance for tannic wine styles from northern Italy as well as young Chilean Carmenere and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Acidity is a key component of most wine, and in Asian food it appears most often in the form of vinegar, and is usually milder than European versions. Sour foods, meanwhile, are normally tempered with the addition of sugar or a sweet ingredient like fresh fruit.

Within China, preferences for sour flavours in food vary widely, with Shanghainese among the more avid lovers of acidic tastes.

As a result, in Shanghai, unlike other parts of China where new wine drinkers comment that many European white wines are "too sour" for their liking, white wine enjoys a higher consumption rate than the national average.

Sweetness, by contrast, can be just as tricky. The best Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Peranakan, Thai or Vietnamese dishes have carefully measured sweetness levels, and the introduction of sweet wines at the dining table would detract from the integrity and balance of the dish.

### **Umami**

Differences abound, but one thing is certain - nearly all Asians have an intense love affair with their favourite textures.

The range is wide, from the gelatinous and chewy texture of chicken feet to the rubbery consistency of jellyfish, the melt-in-your-mouth velvety feel of slow-braised sea cucumber to the silkiness of soft tofu and the various textures of sashimi.

Texture is key in composing a balanced dish, and adding another textural component to food is the fifth flavour, that bouillon, savoury hit known as umami, which was identified in Japan more than 100 years ago.

Although it is defined as a combination of amino and nucleic acids identifiable by receptors on the tongue, the other important role that umami plays is the way it rounds out other flavour components.

Umami is an important component in nearly every meal in Asia, starting with the umami-laden fermented soy sauce, which is used as ubiquitously as salt is used in Europe.

This appreciation for umami in food means that similar subtle, layered flavours in wine are appreciated by food and wine aficionados.

A mature wine such as a cru classe red Bordeaux, 20 years old or more, would echo umami's harmonious, gentle layers and work very well with umami-laden dishes.

### **Better Understanding**



But it is not just consumer tastes that are defining how wine is becoming accepted in different countries across Asia. A large part of it is down to the maturity of the market.

For cosmopolitan cities such as Hong Kong or Singapore, where wine made its way into the dining culture (albeit in a small way) starting in the 1970s and 1980s, wine preferences followed those of the expatriates and foreigners who were more familiar with the beverage.

White wine sales during this period were higher than reds in cities such as Hong Kong.

For less mature wine markets where the growth started in the mid-1990s, such as China, it was red wine that led the way.

Oddly this was less to do with taste than the numerous reports that focused on the health benefits of red wine; this link with health is one of the main reasons for wine's recent success in Asia.

Historically, all the expensive and most sought-after food ingredients have been those with purported health benefits - consider bird's nest soup or sea cucumber.

Many dishes in a fine dining Chinese restaurant, such as abalone, sea turtle or shark's fin soup, will cost upwards of 100 euros for a single portion.

Thus, paying high prices for fine wine can be justified by new consumers as in their minds it is something that gives pleasure and does them good.

And while it may seem a unique way of appreciating wine, it is just this sort of attitude that will hold the key to gaining a better understanding of the Asian wine drinker and their tastes.

Only by embracing our region's rich culinary heritage, how we define deliciousness, and how the market has evolved in different countries, can we come one step closer to understanding the differences and similarities that make up the Asian palate.

*For more articles by Jeannie Cho Lee, visit [AsianPalate.com](http://AsianPalate.com)*