



## **An Asian Approach to Wine Matching**

*Jeannie Cho Lee wrote the book(s) on it*

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Jeannie Cho Lee looked over the 18-course menu at Benu and reached for the wine list. The only Asia-born Master of Wine, she covers the world of the grape on her Asian Palate Hong Kong-based website, focusing on what to drink with Asian food. (She has also written for Wine Spectator.) She was intent on finding two wines for us to drink with the menu by chef Corey Lee (no relation), with its flavors that harken to his roots in Korean cuisine.

Jeannie, a pretty mother of four, knows something of Korean dishes herself. Born in South Korea, she grew up there but she came to the United States to go to Smith College and then earn a master's degree in public policy at Harvard University. That's when she discovered wine. She has written two books on how wine works with Asian cuisines. It's safe to say that few in the wine world have as keen a grasp of this topic as she does.

Before opening Benu in 2011, Corey Lee was the chef de cuisine at the French Laundry. He does not cook strictly Asian food, but he does introduce strong flavors that could challenge wine even as it bridges East and West with the kind of finesse that ordinarily should welcome wine. That's why we picked this restaurant for Jeannie's recent visit to San Francisco.

The menu doesn't provide much help, merely listing several key ingredients for each dish, as in "Oyster, Pork Belly, Kimchi." One can imagine a hearty Korean dish, the richness of the proteins balanced with the sour and spice of the fermented cabbage. What arrived, however, was a single bite of the oyster resting on a very finely chopped braise of pork belly and kimchi, nestled in what looked like origami-folded edible yellow glass. I wished I had five more of them.

Ah, but what does one drink with that? White wine for the oyster or red for the pork belly, or would the kimchi kill any wine?

Similarly, "Salt and Pepper Squid" in a Chinese restaurant would bring large slices of the squid lavishly seasoned with pepper and fried so they curl on themselves. Benu's version captured the same flavors but magically impregnated them into the undulating surface of a fragile wafer-thin cracker made of the squid ink. It's a phenomenal dish, combining delicacy of texture with assertive flavors. Would a crisp white, a sweeter white or a lighter red be best with it?

As she pored over the wine list, she said her primary rule in choosing wine for any Asian cuisine was not to try to match a wine with each dish, but to find two wines versatile enough to drink throughout the meal. They must go with a wide range of flavors and textures. Asian meals, at least the sort of celebratory ones that we might want to match with special wines, are designed to offer a panoply of different dishes, and in a very different order than Western wine dinners follow.

"In a Korean or Chinese meal, the best, most elaborate dishes come first. Even in Korean barbecue, the first thing you get is the beef. At the end is when you get the buckwheat noodles. You're supposed to appreciate the best stuff while you're still hungry," she noted. "When you think about wine, our progression in the West is totally the opposite. We start with the lighter wines and end with the most important."

Not only that, she added, at Asian dinners several dishes come at once and everyone shares them. That led her to the idea of serving at least two different wines. In theory, one or the other should fit with each dish. Part of the fun, of course, is to compare and contrast, to appreciate how each changes the different dishes—and how the wines affect the dishes.

For Benu's flavors and textures she wanted a red wine that had plenty of character on its own but no extremes of tannins or acidity, which could clash with any spiciness and sweetness, common to Korean and Southeast Asian dishes. After some thought she homed in on a red Burgundy, in particular the Leroy Bourgogne 1999, which Benu's sommelier, Yoon

Ha, said was drinking with remarkable freshness for a 13-year-old Pinot Noir. For the white wine she narrowed the choice to an Albariño, an Alsace Sylvaner and a Friuli white. Ha warned that the Sylvaner and Friulano could be too substantial for the lighter courses, so we settled on Do Ferreiro Albariño Cepas Vellas 2009 to test how its tangy acidity would perform with the food.

How did they do? For me the the white wine got the edge in a menu replete with seafood dishes featuring everything from oysters and monkfish liver to squid and abalone. But two-thirds of the way through, Jeannie noted that she found herself favoring the red.

"I have an Asian palate," she shrugged. "We like spicy, sometimes aggressive flavors, and chewy, gelatinous or very soft textures that Westerners usually don't. I find that Asians like wines that emphasize those characteristics. Westerners want to soften the impact."

Since I pride myself in being open to "authentic" tastes and textures, it took a moment to realize I was guilty as charged. Another dish at Benu, an innocent-looking ball of anchovy, lily bulb and peanut, packed a wallop of umami flavors. I loved the dish, but not what it did for the red wine, which amped up the otherwise modest tannins in the Bourgogne rouge. The Albariño was refreshing.

The same sort of thing happened with another dish, Japanese eel encased in crème fraîche with lime. She loved the Burgundy with it. "It changes more, it makes the eel [taste] more eely," she said. I wanted the refreshing balance of the white, the tartness of which linked up better with the lime flavors.

Jeannie recalled being on a panel in China recently at an event exploring wines to drink with authentic Chinese food. The British wine writer at her left blanched at the six tastes of jellyfish lined up with a variety of wines to try. "He hated jellyfish. He said it was like chewing on rubber bands. I was looking for a wine that would enhance the character. He wanted one that would overpower the dish. He chose a fortified wine."

For me, this exercise validated my first rule of matching food and wine, to drink what we like with food we like. All the rest, I like to say, is fine-tuning. With a red and white at hand for each dish, I could tweak the highs and lows and enhance the pleasure of a terrific dinner. Good call, Jeannie.