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You're now free to booze about the cabin

By Zachary Kussin

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Red is in on Singapore Airlines. Photo: FIXION – MMS

It was lunchtime at Gotham Bar and Grill on East 12th Street, where I sat with Jeannie Cho Lee — the Hong Kong-based author, TV host and professor, who holds the honor of being the first Asian Master of Wine. Directly in front of me stood three flutes of Champagne — Krug, Dom Perignon and Taittinger — whose varying tastes Lee expertly explained to me as I took sips of each. But this was far from an ordinary course on the differences in fine Champagnes.



Jeannie Cho Lee's guide to wining at 30,000 feet. Photo: Handout

“In many ways, Champagne would hold itself better in the air because of how you serve it,” she tells me — obviously meaning chilled. “It’s the closest to what you’d experience on the ground.”

We spent several hours that day discussing the science of drinking — and enjoying — wine while flying on a plane. Believe it or not, the taste of it can change on board. And Lee would know: not only is she a frequent traveler, but she also serves as a wine consultant for Singapore Airlines to help select labels across all the company’s routes.

Simply put, your mouth feels parched on a plane because of dry cabin pressure, and that has a big impact on your sense of taste. Meanwhile, refrigerated storage affects bottles’ nuanced flavors — some reds can be the biggest victims.

“You get [fewer] fruit characters coming through and more of the acidity and tannins,” she explains of reds when chilled. Tannins, which are compounds from fruit skins that give red wine dry textures, can actually taste more harsh. Couple that with increased acidity from refrigeration and you’ll probably make a face after taking the first swig.

But don’t be alarmed; you can still enjoy a glass (or several) while jetting the skies. You just need to know how. Read on for Lee’s tips on getting the most out of your pours.



Taittinger Champagne on SIA. Photo: Handout

If you're a red wine aficionado looking to take some sips after takeoff, it's best to give the glass some time to warm up. Just cupping the serving of red with your hands for 10 to 15 minutes — or leaving it out for 30 minutes to reach cabin temperature — can enhance flavors while cutting back on the acidity and tannins. "The goal is to get the red wine's temperature to about ... 68 degrees Fahrenheit," Lee says.

Do you fancy drinking newly released Barolos or Bordeaux varieties when you're on the ground? If so, keep them on the ground, as these tannic reds require decanting and can't release their full flavors up in dry, pressurized airplane cabins. On the other hand, pinot noirs — which Lee says are "fruit-driven, and very full and direct" — are a better bet, and they taste fine slightly cooler. Singapore Airlines carries a variety of Grand Cru red burgundies (which are pinot noirs), including 2011 Louis Jadot Clos Vougeot Grand Cru and 2010 Domaine Albert Bichot Charmes Chambertin Grand Cru.

If you want to play it safe, it's hard to go wrong with white wine. "Luckily, the serving temperature of whites straight from the beverage cart at around ... 50 degrees Fahrenheit is a great serving temperature," Lee notes. Best of all, whites don't have any tannins, so you won't get that dry taste that only gets worse in the air. Similarly, Champagne holds up well in flight because of the cooler serving temperatures, and Singapore Airlines has great ones on offer. One of them is Taittinger — served in business class — which was one of my samples that afternoon.

Eat, drink and be merry! But be sure to stay hydrated — after all, you are sitting in a pretty dry environment. “My personal advice would be to drink at least one glass of water for every glass of wine,” Lee recommends. Though she says she hasn’t seen any substantial studies to prove this, a dry cabin can make some passengers feel the effects of alcohol both faster and stronger. And who really wants to arrive at their destination with a nasty hangover?

Long flights lend themselves very well to sleep. Some folks feel drowsy after drinking wine, and having some on board can let them catch some nice Z’s while they jet. Meanwhile, wine can make others stay awake, and if dozing off is your priority on the plane, then steer clear. It’s also a tool to cut jet lag, Lee adds. “I choose to drink wine according to the time zone of my destination,” she says. “If it is dinnertime at my destination, I would have a glass of wine and something to eat, but if it is breakfast, I would abstain and try to teach my body to start adjusting to the local timezone.”