

Christine Salins

Book Review

By Christine Salins

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Asian Palate: Savouring Asian Cuisine and Wine

By Jeannie Cho Lee. (Asset Publishing, US\$98)

Masters of Wine are an elite group of people whose knowledge of wine is so superior that they can identify the variety of wine and the region it comes from, in a blind tasting. It takes a huge amount of dedication and study to pass the rigorous examinations conducted by the Institute of Masters of Wine in London, so anyone who succeeds is held in very high regard indeed.

According to the institute's website, there are only 279 of these clever folk in the world and only 75 are women. Even fewer are Asian, which makes Jeannie Cho Lee very special indeed. In fact, the cover jacket of her book "Asian Palate: Savouring Asian Cuisine and Wine" describes her as the first Asian to be awarded the Master of Wine title.

As such, she has become quite a celebrity. Since the official announcement of her MW status in 2008, stories about her have appeared in publications and online news agencies around the world. Korean-born Jeannie has lived in Hong Kong since the early 90s but she travels extensively to Europe and North America as an international wine judge, speaker, wine writer and educator.

"Asian Palate" is her first book and what a beautiful book it is, with stunning layout and photography and a unique perspective on food and wine.

The book is broken down into chapters on 10 major Asian cities: Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Taipei, Tokyo, Seoul, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Mumbai. As well as offering a broad insight into each city's dining culture and each cuisine's key flavours, it explores their drinking culture and specifically how wine can be accommodated within that culture.

Advice is given on which wines best complement the distinctive flavours of typical dishes, highlighting how local spices, ingredients and cooking methods affect wine flavours.

For example, a Korean pork and kimchi stir-fry might call for a dry Rosé or a light- to medium-bodied fruity red, whereas a tannic red would clash with the high salt content and the nuances of a delicate wine would be lost with the high chilli content.

On the other hand, a full-bodied red would fit the bill nicely alongside Malaysia's beef rending, whereas a light-bodied wine would be overpowered by the weight of the dish.

There's a common misconception that wine doesn't pair well with Asian food, and that it is often better to opt for beer instead. Certainly, there are some aspects about the Asian table that make wine-matching a challenge – the strong condiments and spices, communal dining and wide range of flavours not least among them.

But through years of diligent research, the author has come up with an easy-to-follow guide that makes it a breeze, presented in a way that will really enhance the consumer's knowledge and appreciation of both wine and Asian food.

This lavish book has already won a couple of prestigious international awards including Britain's 2009 André Simon Food and Drink Book Award. It was named The Best Book in the World at the French Gourmand World Cookbook Awards.

Stylish enough for the coffee table, it's also a very practical guide for food and wine enthusiasts. Selling for around US\$98, it doesn't come cheap but you can be sure there is nothing else like it on the market. Available from Asset Publishing and Research Limited in Hong Kong, it can be ordered through www.amazon.com or by emailing books@theasset.com