



Jeannie Cho Lee, a Hong Kong based freelance writer and educator, recently passed the rigorous examinations to become a Master of Wine.

DEBUNKING ASIAN MYTHS

There are three myths about wine drinking in China and other emerging Asian wine consuming countries, which still circulate among wine circles in Europe and North America: (1) Asians don't know much about wine, (2) Asian consumers often mix wine with Coke, and (3) Asian fine wine consumers are label drinkers.

During my years as an Asian wine writer, judge and educator, I've heard these opinions, sometimes disguised as questions, from my Western counterparts. Often accompanying these queries is an undertone of superiority mixed with pity for the unfortunate, yet growing number of Asians, who do not truly appreciate wine.

Myths become myths because there is one prevailing viewpoint, story or perspective that has been reinforced over and over again. However, the reality is more complex. Living in the midst of fast-moving, dynamic Asian economies, I'd like to propose that these are in fact myths and out-dated perspectives.

Myth number (1): Asians don't know much about wine. Compared to whom? How much does the average European or American drinker really know about wine? Looking at Japan, the most mature Asian market, there is no doubt the desire to learn about wine continues unabated. There are about 7,000 qualified sommeliers (more than in all of France) that passed a rigorous exam to obtain the coveted title. Just in the past few years, the number of Asian-based Approved Program Providers (APP) of the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) courses has surpassed the total number in the United States.

My experience teaching wine in Hong Kong reveals a huge demand for wine education and a genuine thirst for knowledge.

Myth number (2): Asian consumers often mix wine with Coke. This practice was widely witnessed by visitors in China during the wine boom of the 1990s. However, it is now rarely seen. Among the reasons for its prevalence in the past was the poor quality of many wines and China's drinking culture.

In 1997, there was a huge wine glut throughout Asia, in particular in Japan and China, where millions of bottles turned to vinegar in warehouses. Part of the reason for the glut was the economic crash, but some of the blame must be shouldered by overly zealous and sometimes greedy producers who dumped their least marketable wine onto what they considered an 'ignorant and immature market'. Just prior to the crash in 1997, wine was a normal fixture at banquets, business dinners, bars and karaoke lounges. However, there were few importers who knew how to store, transport and handle wine correctly in China. Wines normally spent weeks or even months in questionable government storage conditions before they were cleared for collection. My notes of wines tasted in Shanghai and Beijing during this time had many question marks with notes that read 'Out of condition?' The Chinese could be forgiven for having to add Coke or Sprite to such wines. But it was true that this was equally practiced with expensive, high quality wines in sound condition.

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Wine drinking culture needs to be understood in the context of the larger dining and drinking culture in different parts of Asia. Wine consumption, because of the high relative per bottle cost, is often occasion-based. For the majority of newcomers to wine, wine is consumed as a special occasion beverage - at formal banquets and celebratory evenings. In these situations, different forms of alcohol - whether beer, wine, spirits or whisky - can often be served in succession or together. Wine was categorised and treated like spirits or it took the place of whisky or Cognac. Thus, various home-made concoctions with wine were normal.

Myth number (3): Asian fine wine consumers are mainly label drinkers. Asian consumers have a reputation for collecting only the top wines and driving up fine wine prices. However, it could be argued that fine wine consumers in the UK or the US contributed to a rise in prices as certain blue chip wines ('labels') reached the status they enjoy now. Label drinking is also a fact of life at the other end of the spectrum. Yellow Tail and Gallo are household labels in the US just as Jacobs Creek might be in the UK among supermarket shoppers. Strong brands also exist in Asia; for example, the success of Montes Alpha in Korea. But the area the global media focuses on are the Lafite prices pushed up on Livex, or on a merchant's listing, because of the strong demand from China.

There is a cultural reason behind the popularity of some expensive fine wines. Since wine consumption is mainly a special occasion beverage, wine becomes the lubricant to 'give face' or develop *guangxi* (forge a bond or establish a relationship). Fine, rare wine that is expensive is often a generous gesture to show respect or to strengthen *guangxi*. A bottle of Lafite 1982 highlights this gesture in clear, bold letters.

I've met plenty of knowledgeable wine lovers who began collecting in the 1970s, when wine was not fashionable. Dr Anthony Cheng from Hong Kong is from that generation. He doesn't look to Parker or other ratings for guidance and believes inexpensive wine can offer equal pleasure.

"Let's just say, I don't buy Lafite," says Cheng. "I enjoy the estates that I consider the most consistent, such as Pichon Lalande from 1970 onwards. I think it is more consistent than the first growths, especially in vintages like 1975 and 1978."

While there are those who buy fine wine for investment purposes, there are just as many or more who savour the journey of discovery. Dr N. K. Yong, a retired surgeon with an exceptional cellar in Singapore, says, "Drinking is easy. Understanding takes time and patience."

Asian consumers are surprisingly modest about what they do

know about wine. However, those interested in wine, are great students who make a concerted effort to learn the language of wine. This enthusiasm is nurturing a whole new generation of wine drinkers whose passion can be seen in the numerous local wine blogs, articles and coverage on the subject. If Japan is any indication of future trends for the rest of Far East Asia, there is already a core group of very knowledgeable consumers, far too modest to admit how much they know. It's like the shy Japanese lady who says she doesn't speak any English, but can read and write with great proficiency.

»» Blue chip wines reached that status because they became labels. ««

Asia may continue to be perceived as a label drinking market. But this is no different from what happens in New York or London. By definition, cities like

Hong Kong, Seoul and Singapore are premium wine markets. Bag in boxes are rare and wines below US\$5 are looked upon with suspicion. I feel the level of wine knowledge among wine collectors in Asia is deep. It may not be wide, but it is deep. I have often been in the middle of discussions that spanned four decades of a specific property or delved into quality debates between the top producers of Clos Saint Jacques.

As an educator, I respect the extra effort that the language barrier poses. At the beginning of one Intermediate WSET class, I noticed several students in the class saying 'char-don-nay'. And 'pee-not no-er'. How would they know that the 'ch' should be pronounced as 'sh', that the 't' is silent or that 'noir' is pronounced 'ne-wa'? When I see the same students passing the Level 2 exams with their 'Looking Behind the Label' book highlighted, ear-marked and written all over, I feel proud of what they have achieved. It's like asking a European to memorise the characteristics, locations and names of major provinces, municipalities and the capital cities of the top 12 major countries in Asia. Imagine the difficulty in differentiating between the Chinese provinces of Jiangxi and Jiangsu or Shannxi and Shanxi. For many Asian wine lovers, efforts to overcome both the obstacle of the English and European languages, as well as the language of wine, is something to be admired.