



JEANNIE CHO LEE, MW

A Hong Kong-based, Korean-American wine critic, author, journalist, consultant and wine educator. Jeannie was the first ever ethnic Asian to achieve the Master of Wine accreditation.

What Wine has Taught Me About Life

Wine appeared in my life as a saviour after university, giving me direction and focus. Up until then, I hopped from one passion or interest to another with total disregard for what I had studied as an undergraduate and graduate student: international relations and public policy. Moving into the world of wine was effortless since I had spent all of my free time since my childhood obsessing about food. I dove in and did what all good Korean students do: Take classes, learn, study and rack up the certificates, diplomas and awards. All of my efforts culminated in 2008 when I received my Master of Wine (MW) title.

The MW took me longer than I expected because I had four children while also working as a journalist and eventually a wine writer. And like many working mothers, life was a constant juggling act. There were about a dozen balls in the air and I dropped a ball or two, sometimes unintentionally and sometimes intentionally.

Wine was always one of the balls in the air and it started to move from a hobby to something in the shape of a profession, fuelled by having the MW credentials and Hong Kong eliminating its wine duty.

After 30 years of enjoying wine, I feel intensely grateful. Not for the obvious reason that I love what I do, but because of what wine has taught me about life. Who would have thought that wine would one day make me a little bit wiser or a better mother? Below are some unexpected self-revelations during my wine journey.

Why stress is essential for greatness

I've always tried to understand what makes great wine great. Over the years I realized that there is one common thread across all great wines from anywhere in the world. The grape vines from top vineyards are quite stressed – for water, for nutrients, for warmth and for basic sustenance. In a stressful environment where grape vines are

forced to struggle, the vine creates a deeper root system that seeks out water reserves and nutrients and limits yield (high quantity and larger grapes usually mean diluted flavours and concentration). There is a limit on the amount of stress that vines can tolerate and insufficient water, nutrients or sunlight can have detrimental effects on quality. However, there is a narrow band of desirable stress that all good viticulturalists understand instinctively – turn on the tap at the right time with just the right amount of water to allow the grapes to survive but not so much that it gets lazy and doesn't establish deep roots.

As a mother raising four children in Hong Kong, a nagging concern was how much pressure to put on my kids. In an era when parents swing from over-indulging their children to hovering over them as guilt-laden helicopter parents, I was torn. Should I follow my traditional, strict Korean upbringing or be more liberal and follow my American and European friends who granted much more freedom and choice to their children? What I learned from wine told me I needed 'acceptable stress' – somewhere between Amy Chua's Tiger Mom and the laid-back mothers that offered extreme independence. How do you provide just enough stress to instil self-motivation and discipline yet not stifle self-expression or creativity? I haven't found the answer but my middle way was to send my children to local Chinese schools during their younger years, then switch them to international school; similarly at home, I evolved from a traditional Asian parent to a more liberal one as my children matured.

Time and timing is everything

Another key element to producing great wine is understanding the role of timing. While a hundred small decisions are involved in making wine, getting the timing right makes the difference between good and great wine. In the vineyard, timing of preventative measures is key to keeping rot, disease and pests at bay; in the cellar, timing decisions involving date of harvest, maceration length, length of barrel aging are all critical to the wine's style and ultimate quality.

The concept of time by the estate and winemaker often contributes to the wine's quality: Are the wines for early enjoyment or is it made to lay down in your cellar and pass on to your children? Is the winery most concerned about short-term profits and sales or is it a family business to be preserved for generations?

In life, timing is not something we can always control, but understanding the importance of time is something I have learned to always keep in mind. Great wines are made for multiple generations and the ability to defy time (as a timeless, classic possessing long aging potential) is a defining feature of quality wines. Thus when I am confronted with important choices, I try to consider whether the timing is right and how my decision may be judged by my children or my grandchildren.

I've noticed too that when I open a bottle of wine with a meal, the pace and rhythm changes. As time-strapped Hong Kong residents, we often eat far too quickly and the super-efficient Chinese service in most restaurants propels us to eat faster. Adding wine to a meal slows down the pace and I find our meals are longer, our conversations more open and our discussions more interesting.

Beauty is everywhere

Even after 30 years of exploring and tasting wine, I find myself stumbling across wines with such astounding beauty that it leaves me breathless and sometimes in tears. My most recent experience was at the cellar of Domaine Etienne Sauzet while tasting the 2017 Montrachet grand cru from barrel at the end of 2018. It was pure, intricate and delicate and at the same time, persistent and complex. It was a symphony of flavours that stayed on my palate long after I tasted it. Words could not do justice to this experience; instead, I scribbled 'perfection'.

We don't need to taste a grand cru Burgundy to have such epiphanies and marvel at what we as human beings are able to create – destruction and chaos but equally, beauty and magic. In the face of beauty, of great art, a realm that I feel great wine falls under, it is impossible not to be humbled and in awe. Even after all these years, great wine moves me. It reminds me to be hopeful, that despite the mess we are making of the environment and a mockery of democracy, magic can be found in a simple bottle of wine. It reminds me to be grateful that I am part of a world that can produce such beauty, and that life is full of unexpected, wonderful surprises. It reminds me to be humble, that life is a journey of discovery and there is much more we don't know than what we do know.