

# Asian grapevine

Jeannie Cho Lee



Recently I was thrilled to be invited to Ambassadeurs, the fine dining restaurant in Paris' grand Hotel de Crillon. The food, as expected, was exceptional but it was the wines I was really looking forward to: a vertical tasting of Domaine de la Romanee Conti including a 1950 magnum. When I asked my Parisian host about the provenance of these bottles, he looked at me as though I was asking about the colour of his underwear. "This bottle is 60 years old, of course we don't know," he replied. Quietly, I noted several

American strip labels on some of the bottles (indicating that they'd been sent to the US and found their way back to France).

Others had the mark of various auction houses. Clearly they had traversed the world before returning to their home country. I noted all the

corks were original and none were reconditioned (where they're topped up with younger wine and the old cork replaced with a new one). I was surprised that even in Paris, I was the only one at a table of 12 wine lovers who cared so much about a wine's origin.

It also happened at a dinner in Hong Kong a few months ago. My generous host wanted to open a 1959 Chateau Margaux for a small group of friends. He loved this wine and over the years had accumulated 18 bottles at auction. That night, we opened three before he found one that he felt was "the real stuff"; having consumed so much of this particular wine, he felt sure many were fakes. It would have broken my heart but he was nonchalant: "What can you do? Enjoying old wines means taking risks."

Very few people talk about fake or potentially fake wines in Asia – despite the fact that many of us are aware of a growing market for empty first growth Bordeaux bottles in cities across China. We don't want to be told that we're buying or have bought fake wines. I've been invited to numerous dinners and tastings where I was certain, or strongly

Many seem to accept the existence of fake wines as easily as they accept corked ones in a restaurant. I can't be as tolerant

suspected, that some of the wines weren't authentic. A friend here generously opened a magnum of 1982 for me recently – I had tasted this wine several times in the past year, once ex-chateau, so it was easy to identify the fake bottle.

Without the experience and confidence, however, validating the authenticity of mature wines on palate alone is rife with problems. Fake wines have made headlines in major cities around the world in the past few years. This was partly triggered by court cases initiated by wine collector Bill Koch since 2006 against a German dealer, Hardy Rodenstock, for allegedly knowingly selling fake wines. The case has yet to reach trial. Koch decided to sue

parties involved in selling him the alleged fake wines, including auction houses such as Christie's and Acker Merrall & Condit.

Many seem to accept the existence of fake wines as easily as they accept corked ones in a restaurant. I can't be as tolerant. The world of fine wine is shifting and Hong Kong is in the limelight, spurred on by its duty-free status. Already, top Bordeaux chateaux such as Cos d'Estournel sell over half of their production to Asia.

Amid such change, we must ensure an industry with credibility and respectability. This means asking difficult questions and questioning wines sold through our markets. It only takes a scandal or two to spoil the reputation of an entire industry, especially in the eyes of affluent mainland wine lovers who look to Hong Kong as a key source of authentic fine wines.

**Jeannie Cho Lee was the first Asian to be awarded the Master of Wine (MW) title in 2008. Jeannie has written more than 15,000 fine wine reviews and ratings, which can be found at [www.asianpalate.com](http://www.asianpalate.com). Contact her at [features@scmp.com](mailto:features@scmp.com)**