

# Wine Spectator

## HAUTE ASIAN —CUISINE—

A TRIO OF RESTAURANTS IN NEW YORK  
PAIRS EASTERN FOOD & WESTERN WINE

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL GROSS

Asian dining has grown by leaps and bounds in the U.S. in recent decades. Many supermarkets sell fish sauce and fresh sushi. Asian fine dining restaurants—along with serious wine lists to support the food—are starting to follow.

Three notable openings in New York offer an opportunity to see what top talents can do with ambitious Asian cuisine and mostly Western wine lists. The food at Junoon, Jungsk and Brushstroke varies in origin and in how the restaurants apply themselves to the thorny questions of authenticity and satisfying a client base. There have been restaurants with serious food and good wine lists in the past—think the Mandarin in San Francisco, Yujuan Kwag's in Pasadena, Calif., and Tai Yang and Shan Lee Palace in New

York—but now these types of places no longer seem exotic.

The current wave of Asian fine restaurants confidently weaves together culinary flavors, traditions and techniques from Asia, Europe and the United States. Not so long ago a restaurant that pulled ingredients, techniques and traditions from a number of sources seemed diffuse. Today it seems worldly. Junoon may be the most traditional of the three, but it still has elements you might not expect to find in Indian cuisine; likewise Brushstroke, which tailors *kaiseki*-style dining for Manhattan. Jungsk is an exercise in cross-pollination between Korean and American cuisine. All three share great refinement, and a particular understanding of wine.



### BRUSHSTROKE

"I'm making it up," says sommelier Seju Yang about the 160-bottle beverage list he assembled at one-year-old Brushstroke, an haute Japanese restaurant based on the concept of *kaiseki*, a series of beautifully presented dishes featuring a blink-and-you'll-miss-it sense of seasonality.

He doesn't mean "making it up" in the sense that his bona fides aren't solid. He's worked as the sommelier at top-notch New York Japanese restaurants Sakagura, Kyo Ya, and 15 East, originally picking up wine knowledge as a way to talk to customers about sake. But to come up with a serious wine list that works with Brushstroke's cuisine, Yang had to forge his own path: "I have this mindset that we shouldn't have any limitations."

Brushstroke is itself a little nontraditional. A collaboration between New York chef David Bouley and a culinary school in Osaka, Japan, the restaurant was conceived as a way to expose Japanese chefs to new influences and ingredients while building on traditional cooking techniques. Japan-born chef Isao Yamada runs the kitchen, though Bouley himself has been known to drop in on occasion, working shoulder-to-shoulder with the cooks.

Set on a Tribeca street corner, Brushstroke's airy, loftlike dining room (formerly Danube) draws light from windows that overlook the street. Natural materials dominate: a poured concrete backsplash in the entryway; blond wood with knots and imperfections intact in the dining room. Tables hug the perimeter, circling the open kitchen where several cooks work silently, heads bowed. They wear earpieces and microphones on their chef's coats to communicate.

In the dining room, you can choose between eight- or 10-course set menus (the bar seating offers à la carte selections). Though the dishes change frequently, there is a general progression to the order, beginning with seasonal vegetables and moving from raw to cooked fish, then pork or duck, and finally a rice entrée before dessert.

Seasonality, as a concept, goes beyond just winter, spring, summer and fall here. Foods such as herring roe appear for only six weeks and then are gone. A server noted that the cherry blossom stalks in full bloom on the plate of a vegetable dish had just begun to open the week before.

The ephemeral nature of the food extends to the wine as well. Yang chooses new by-the-glass wines every month, often with seasonality in mind. What is Meusault in the winter might change to basic Bourgogne in the spring or Chablis in the summer, getting lighter and crisper as the days get warmer.

Yang's wine-pairing ideas originate from a thought process that comes close to synesthesia. "I was thinking about the color yellow," he says of the first course, a delicate plate of bitter baby spring vegetables covered in a light-yellow miso-mustard seed sauce, "and my vision of Viognier was always yellow." On the axis of Viognier, he rules out barrel-influenced styles with dominating flavors of oak and vanilla. His choice, the 2010 Praxis, a Russian River bottling fermented in stainless-steel, is crisp and appley, developing a steely core alongside the food.

It's not enough, however, to think about just the dish in relation to the wine, says Yang. Because the courses in the set menu exist as parts of a whole, he must consider the progression of wines during the meal as well. A trained composer of classical and jazz music, he compares a 10-course meal with pairings to a long-form piece of music: There must be slow parts that build to a crescendo,



Chef Isao Yamada and sommelier Seju Yang bring years of experience to star chef David Bouley's Japanese restaurant, Brushstroke.

adagios and allegros. Within a meal, he likes to build to three high-points, what he calls "home-run pairings."

As an example of one of these home runs, Yang serves an Emilio Lustau Palo Cortado Jerez Almacenista with grilled pork belly marinated in yuzu kosho (a fermented seasoning of citrus peel, chile peppers and salt) and topped with a black vinegar sauce. "People don't think about Sherry at all," says Yang, noting that a lighter preparation might steer him toward an off-dry Pinot Gris. But the aromatics in the dark sauce and the Sherry are a lock, both oxidized with hints of sweetness. The blanched almond and smoke notes in the Sherry also fall in line with the grilled, fatty meat.

Most customers order bottles off the list rather than pairings for the menus, according to Yang. And he's ready to guide them, whatever their preference. "There's always something that works with the cuisine," he says. Although maybe most telling is his choice for a catch-all pairing: "Champagne. Always Champagne."—J.F.