



MEET THE WINEMAKER China in his hands

Lenz Moser

To the south of Mongolia lies the landlocked region of Ningxia, which has a similar altitude to the peak of Ben Nevis and enjoys 3,000 hours of sunshine per year. On a 250ha plot in its heartland, Austrian winemaker Lenz Moser is bidding to make China world-renowned for quality Cabernet.

The 15th-generation winemaker is a specialist in Grüner Veltliner and formerly headed up Austria's largest producer, but now he is devoted to quirky projects in unheralded regions.

Château Changyu Moser, a collaboration with China's largest winery, is his most ambitious, but in the UK an eclectic range of retailers including Conviviality, Tesco and Berry Bros & Rudd has already bought into it.

At Tesco shoppers are already repurchasing bottles of Moser XV Cabernet and Moser says this is the first time that has ever happened for a Chinese winery on a global basis.

Moser comes from an extremely long line of winemakers who started out in Austria in 1610. The business is called Lenz Moser – a name many of them share – and is still Austria's largest.

His grandfather invented modern trellising and that design prevails in vineyards across the world today, having cut labour requirement by 75%.

His father (another Lenz Moser) sold the business in the 1980s, "and he sold me with it", says Moser. As part of the deal, Moser stayed on as general manager and, with the help of financial investors, turned it into a huge producer accounting for 10% of the country's wines. He left to head up Robert Mondavi's European operation and when it was sold he returned to Austria to set up his own production and import business.

In this capacity Moser travelled to China 12 years ago, touring the country's leading wineries in a bid to convince them to import his wine and sell it on the local market. Changyu, China's largest producer with an output of 150 million bottles a year and a turnover of €750 million, agreed, but in return Moser was asked to sell its wines in export markets.

"For 10 years I was head of international sales and marketing for Changyu, but it never got to the stage of repeat purchasing, because the wine in the bottle was not good enough," says Moser. "So two years ago, Mr Zhou, the chief executive, called me and said: 'If you are still serious about us come and make your own wine and do everything from scratch again.'"

Changyu is based in Shandong, near the coast, southeast of Beijing, which accounts for 40% of Chinese production, but for his project Moser decided to head 1,200km west into the heartland of China. Ningxia enjoys an extreme continental climate, with many more sunshine hours than Bordeaux and a similar altitude to Mendoza. It never rains during harvest. In winter, however, it can reach -25°C and stays so cold that the vines have to be buried. "For four months we put the vines to sleep and we uncover them in late March and budding starts immediately," says Moser.

Moser no longer has anything to do with the main Changyu production but his project in Ningxia will set the blueprint for Changyu's entire operation,

so everything has to be state of the art. The winery cost €70 million and features the best kit money can buy. It is set in a château that would not look out of place in the Loire Valley, and houses an 800-barricade cellar, bottling line and a museum all about Changyu.

Moser has other projects in places such as Turkey and Tokaj, so he cannot be there full time and has trained local staff to aid his efforts, while also leading a cultural shift among workers. One major change he made was delaying the harvest for two weeks. "The 2014 vintage was not good enough so we did not make anything," he says. "When you go abroad with these wines you have to surprise and excite people. In 2014 the weather was not good and they harvested too early, to a date and not to the ripeness of the grapes. They had to do it before the moon festival as the workers would leave for that. I was the first one, in 2015, to break that rule and I delayed it by two weeks. It did the trick and now everybody does it. We increased ripeness, alcohol and tannins."

Corks are flown in from Amorim. "You can have screwcap for Austrian Grüner Veltliner, but I want this to be a classic château operation," says Moser. "I would rather be perceived as Old World than New World with this project."

The majority of production is Cabernet Sauvignon and he even makes a white Cabernet with pure free-run juice.

There are three tiers to the wines. Moser XV (a nod to his 15th-generation status) sells for £8.50 in Tesco and has had a strong start to trading in the UK. The operation produces 350,000 bottles of this and 120,000 bottles of white Cabernet. "I did it because I don't really have white grapes to play with [he is experimenting with Riesling, along with Merlot, but the quantity is negligible] and Europe is hooked on white.

But I also wanted to bring China into the next phase of pioneering and innovation. China is known for copying things but here it is pioneering something. It's a new taste profile. It's a real mouthful of wine and can be consumed in summer and winter.

It can age well. In the next five years it will go uphill. In essence it has the DNA of a red wine, I just stripped out the tannins and colour."

Moser Family is a £25 wine aged in used oak, and 50,000 bottles are produced each year. Then there is the grand vin, Château Changyu Moser XV, from 18-year-old vines in the best plots, retailing at £50.

"We are going to build on this year after year," says Moser, who welcomes competition from other Chinese wineries on export markets, saying a category is forming and that Wines of China is around the corner. "For a Chinese wine it's quite pricey but you can put it in a blind tasting with any top wine from Chile or California and it will look very good. We are new at this game and still need to earn our stripes in terms of points and medals.

"The wine develops so nicely in the bottle. I need freshness in every wine I make but I still need friendliness and that only comes from ripe tannins. 2015 is the first vintage I have done myself with Fan Xi [his co-winemaker at the estate]. 2016 will be the next step of our evolution. We have to have another leap in quality each year."

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