

imbibe

STING LIKE A BUTTERFLY, FLOAT LIKE A BEE

SPRITZ BLITZ

GO LIGHT
OR GO HOME
THIS SPRING

THE YOUNG
WINEMAKERS
YOU NEED ON
YOUR LIST

PETE BROWN
EXPLORES THE
CRAFT BEER
REVOLUTION

PROJECT SPHERE

HOW CONCRETE
EGGS TOOK OVER
THE WINE WORLD

LOVE MATCH

FIND THE RIGHT
IPA STYLE FOR
YOUR CUSTOMERS

THE NORTH IS COMING

The people and places driving a regional bar renaissance



ENTER THE

DRAGON

Ningxia has established itself as China's premier fine wine region in little more than 10 years.

CHRIS LOSH heads up to Helan to see whether this fast-growing region really could be the Chinese Napa

enz Moser puts down his refractometer and gazes at the recently harvested Cabernet vineyards in front of him. 'You know, China thinks long term, but it makes things happen in the short term,' the Austrian winemaker says. 'The pace of change in this country is truly amazing.'

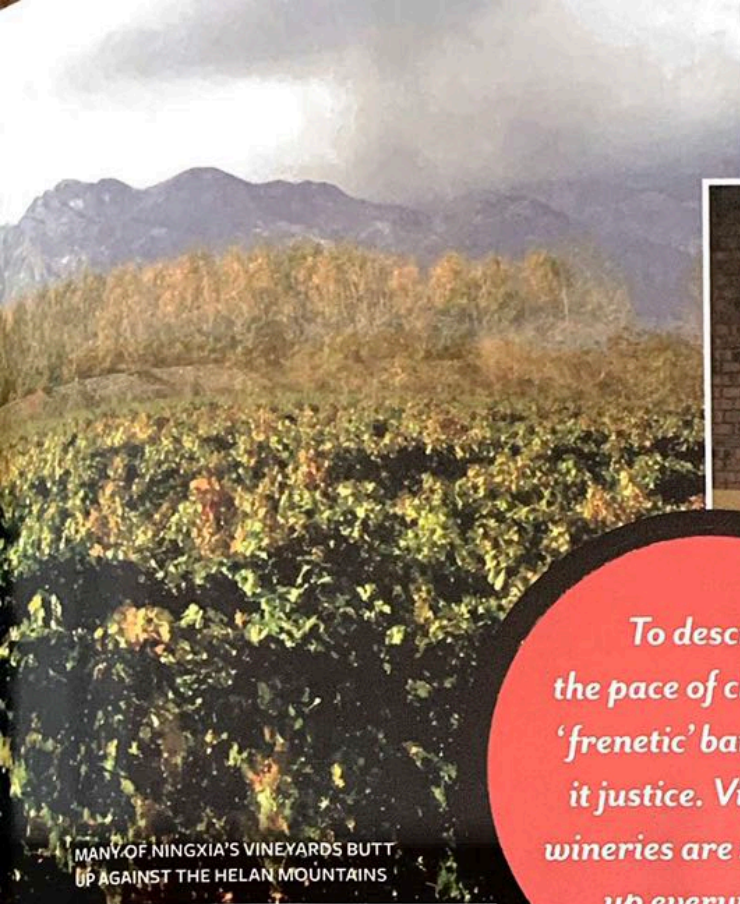
He's not wrong. We're on the edge of the city of Yinchuan, a two hour flight west of the Chinese capital, Beijing. Thirty years ago, this was a small town of 30,000 people. Now it's a city of two million and the government has plans to double its population to four in the next 10 years. In every direction eight-lane highways stretch into nothingness, ready for the soon-to-be-built high-rises.

Yinchuan is the biggest city in Ningxia (pronounced Ning-shah) province. And if there's one word that you need to learn about Chinese wine, it's this one. Ningxia is not about volume – it's responsible for only about 10% of the country's production. But its focus on quality wines means it punches above its weight and there's an unmistakable buzz to the region – a feeling that this could be the place to put Chinese wine on the map.

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

Moser might be Austrian by birth, but he's made wine all over the world, including California, and he likens the energy here to Napa Valley in the 1970s. This, of course, is when the legendary Californian vintner Robert Mondavi was travelling the world telling anyone who'd listen that his wines deserved to be judged against the finest in Europe – worth remembering should you be tempted to dismiss Chinese wine as being too niche to bother about.

Having worked with China's biggest wine company Changyu for over a decade, Moser has partnered with it to create a new estate in Ningxia. Château Changyu Moser XV is a vanilla-coloured slab of



MANY OF NINGXIA'S VINEYARDS BUTT UP AGAINST THE HELAN MOUNTAINS

To describe the pace of change as 'frenetic' barely does it justice. Vines and wineries are springing up everywhere

rococo grandeur straight out of the Bordeaux playbook, and its ambitions are obvious.

Moser has spent much of the last three years schlepping his bottles round Europe and has managed to secure listings and importers throughout the continent.

'First we have to surprise people, which I think we are doing,' he says. 'Then we want to keep on getting better.'

For Moser, 2015 was a watershed vintage. It was a good one for starters, after a trickier 2014, but his vines were also 10 years old by then, meaning they were 'starting to get interesting'.

BREAKING GROUND

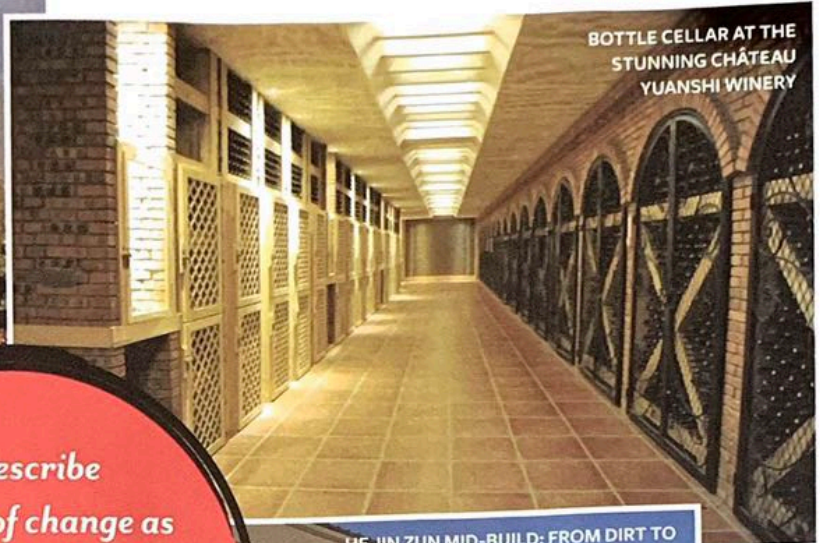
The sheer youth of the vines is a reminder of just how embryonic the wine industry is here – and, like the city itself, of how fast it's grown. The first winery of any description appeared here in the mid-80s, with the smiley, chatty Jing Zhang setting up the first boutique one 20 years later.

Visit her Helan Qingxue winery – the name means 'on a sunny day you can see the shining snow' – and there are photos of bulldozers laying the groundwork in what was essentially a vast desert. The pictures are from 2005. Just six years later, Jing's Jia Bei Lan Cabernet won International Wine of the Year in the Decanter World Wine Awards.

Such international approval opened the floodgates. Already Ningxia has 38,000ha under vine – about the same as New Zealand – and over 100 wineries. The next 10 years should see the vineyard area increase to 60,000ha.

To describe the pace of change here as 'frenetic' barely does it justice. There's no shortage of space – Ningxia is one of the least populated regions in China – and vines and wineries are springing up everywhere.

This is how your correspondent found himself in a car being reversed at speed down a white dust track. We can see He Jin Zun, the new winery we want to visit, we just can't get to it. A year ago,



BOTTLE CELLAR AT THE STUNNING CHÂTEAU YUANSHI WINERY

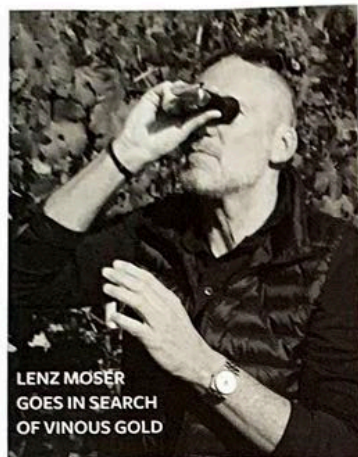


HE JIN ZUN MID-BUILD: FROM DIRT TO FUNCTIONING WINERY IN A FORTNIGHT



EMMA GAO YUAN OF SILVER HEIGHTS





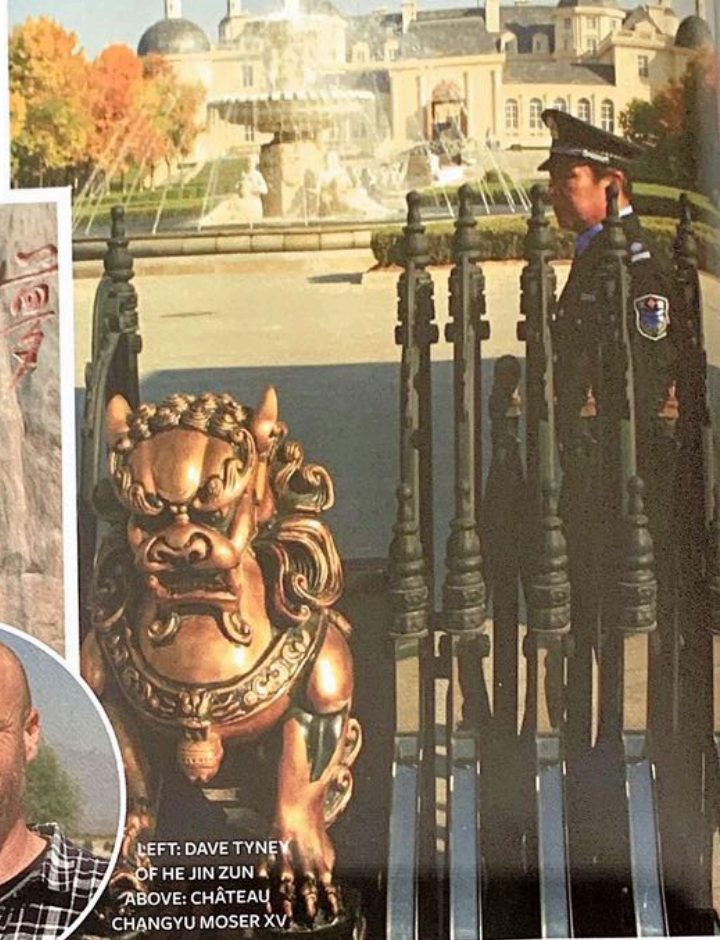
LENZ MOSER
GOES IN SEARCH
OF VINOUS GOLD



JING ZHANG
OF HELAN
QINGXUE



LEFT: DAVE TYNEY
OF HE JIN ZUN
ABOVE: CHÂTEAU
CHANGYU MOSER XV



the place didn't exist so no one knows the directions, and signposts haven't been put up yet because the roads haven't been finished. Nor, it turns out, has the winery.

'They are literally building the winery as we go,' says Dave Tyney, the affable Kiwi winemaker at He Jin Zun. 'Two weeks ago, this floor was dirt and there were no tanks. Now they put in a tank and we fill it the next day. It's stressful, but you get used to it.'

Ningxia and Marlborough are officially 'friendship regions' and there's no shortage of Kiwis working among the semi-built chaos. It's hard to imagine anywhere on earth less like Marlborough, which, for the young team mainlining coffee and frantically scribbling on pads of paper, might be part of the attraction. Ningxia has its rough edges and quirks, but it's undeniably exciting.

METHOD OR MADNESS

Look on a map and you'll see that Ningxia is on the same latitude as Napa Valley. But the two could hardly be more different. While Napa is all about valleys and sea fog, Ningxia is essentially a high desert.

A huge, open dusty plain, Ningxia's vineyards are high at 1,100m above sea level and 1,000km from the nearest sea. Hot in summer and freezing in winter, the climate is about as continental as it gets. In the shadow of the towering Helan Mountains to the west, rainfall is miserly – just 200mm a year – though most of it falls, unhelpfully, in July and August.

Other than that, it's an excellent climate for grape growing. Even in the height of summer, there are no heat spikes. And since the temperature rarely gets above 35°C the vines don't shut down.

It reminded this journalist of Mendoza,

where similarly the altitude creates a big diurnal shift that preserves natural acidity in the grapes. Temperatures typically drop below 20°C at night in midsummer, while closer to harvest they are already in single figures.

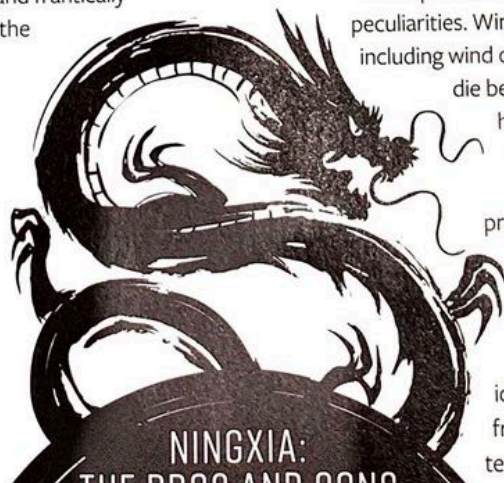
This rapid fall in the mercury is one of Ningxia's peculiarities. Winters are brutally cold at -20°C, not including wind chill, and come in quickly. Since vines die below -18°C, the Chinese growers have a unique solution to prevent this happening – they bury them.

After vintage, the plants are quickly pruned, then the trunks laid down and covered with earth to create what looks like rows of Saxon burial mounds. The growers then flood the earth so that it freezes. Encased in ice, the plants are thankfully protected from the potentially fatal, super-low temperatures of mid-winter.

The need to bury the vines at the end of the growing season impacts all the way through viticulture in Ningxia.

The rows, for instance, need to be wide enough to get a tractor down them to plough up the soil, which means no high-density plantings.

Plants have traditionally been trained in the 'single dragon trellis', which makes burial easier, but is not always good for maximising grape ripening. The burying takes its toll on the vines, too.



NINGXIA: THE PROS AND CONS

- ✓ Inherently different. Good USP
- ✓ Lots of young, bright, female winemakers
- ✓ Reliable climate
- ✓ High altitude gives natural lift to the wines
- ✓ New and exciting
- ✗ Not especially cheap
- ✗ Most wineries concentrating on local market
- ✗ Not many whites
- ✗ Young vines
- ✗ Some issues with tannin management
- ✗ Lack of viticultural knowledge

Since vines need to be picked by mid-October and pruned by the start of November (to ensure safe burial by 20 November), this is not somewhere that growers are tempted to leave grapes on the vine for an extra couple of weeks in search of a few more degrees Baumé.

'The biggest challenge we have is the short growing season,' says Yang Weiming, winemaker at the strikingly beautiful Château Yuanshi winery. 'Frost can come at the end of September. If we want freshness we really have to pick early, but phenolic ripeness comes late.'

Weiming is one of a plethora of bright young Chinese winemakers driving the Ningxia revolution. Both highly qualified and well travelled, all of them seem to have worked in France following their degree, and many have also put in time in other parts of Europe and (albeit less commonly) the New World.

Rather than a love of fruit ripeness, they've brought back with them a European appreciation for structure and freshness in their wines. Silver Heights' Emma Gao Yuan, who spent several years working at Calon Ségur in Bordeaux, also returned with a French husband.

'I want to bring French taste here, not just ripe grapes,' she says. 'I prefer the less-perfect years like 2014, which are cooler and lower in alcohol.'

Weiming's point about phenolic ripeness, however, is well made. If there's a common thread through the wines, it's of lifted fruit followed by squeaky tannin; of wines that start with elegance, but get a touch green on the finish.

This may partly be down to the price that the winemakers are prepared to pay to chase freshness, but it's just as likely to be a function of the viticulture. Yields per hectare might look fine, but take into account the rows being so far apart to facilitate that all-important winter burial and the production per plant can actually be relatively high.

Likewise, the undoubted expertise in the wineries is not yet matched in the vineyard. Canopy-management techniques, which could slow down ripening to allow phenolic ripeness to catch up with sugar ripeness seem to be practised rarely, if at all.

At Château Changyu Moser XV, hiring a local vineyard manager is high on Moser's list of priorities. 'I want to work with Chinese people – we are in China!' he says. 'But [in the vineyards] it's more difficult. The universities here put the focus more on winemaking than viticulture.'



THREE TO TRY

CHÂTEAU CHANGYU MOSER XV BLANC DE NOIR CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2017

Lenz Moser is hoping to get the go-ahead to plant Grüner Veltliner in Ningxia. In the meantime, this white made from Cabernet is his only non-red offering. More aromatic and citrusy than the dialled-down but fleshier 2016, it's very easy to like. £12.85, *Bibendum*, bibendum-wine.co.uk

CHÂTEAU CHANGYU MOSER FAMILY CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2015

Lenz had to cancel his workers' holidays during the Mooncake Festival to get this wine picked, but it was worth it. There's great fruit ripeness here – black cherries, chocolate and vanilla with fully ripe tannins. Will age, too. £26.44, *Bibendum*, bibendum-wine.co.uk

JIA BEI LAN ESTATE 2015

Jing Zhang is a big believer in freshness in wines. 'Pick late and you get jam, pick early and you get red or blue fruits,' she says. There's a bright lift to this 80/20 Cab/Merlot blend, with her over 16-year-old vines adding layers of depth through the palate. £24, *Panda Fine Wine*, pandafinewine.com

A NEW DAWN

This, perhaps, is where the Ningxia revolution comes up against its greatest challenge. After all, you can learn how to make good wine in a few years, but understanding what to plant and how to get the most out of your vines can take centuries. And here the industry appears split between those such as Qing Song Xao, owner of Lan Cui winery, who asks 'why should we copy Napa or Bordeaux?', and those such as Lenz Moser who wonder 'why reinvent the wheel?'

Currently, for sure, Bordeaux's influence looms large, with most wineries intent on a Cabernet-based château model that plays well with the local market. Vinously, as well as politically, reds dominate. White wines are barely 10% of the production.

Cab is a variety that clearly has potential here, though in the opinion of this journalist, seems to perform better when it has a little Merlot in the mix to plump out the mid-palate and ease the tannins. But you can't help but feel that the uniqueness of this region means there ought to be another variety that will take off here and really put Ningxia on the map, an equivalent of Malbec in Mendoza or Sauvignon Blanc in Marlborough.

A few years ago, there was a lot of talk about Cabernet Gernischt (Carmenère) which, given how suicidally late it ripens, seems positively masochistic in a region prone to autumn frost. Many wineries have experimental vineyards, and everything from Tempranillo, Zinfandel, Muscat, Mourvedre, Syrah and Riesling are being trialled at the moment. But the variety that came up most often in discussions with winemakers was the French red-wine grape Marselan. A French Cabernet/Grenache cross, it has potential and some wineries, such as Domaine Pu Xang, are able to attract seriously high prices for it.

That said, neither the Bordeaux blends, nor the Marselans, have a definable 'Ningxia style' yet. That may well come with more vine age and better viticultural knowledge. It's still very early days.

So, will the UK restaurants be awash with Ningxia wines in the next couple of years? Probably not. But there are a small number of good producers who are making an effort to expand internationally, and their wines have real merit. Jia Bei Lan is already here (Panda Wines), as is Château Changyu Moser XV (Bibendum), and I'd expect Silver Heights to be snapped up shortly.

It's early days, but as a famous Chinese proverb points out, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.' ♦