



WINE WONDERLAND CHINA

by René Gabriel: www.bxttotal.com

Everything from the ‘strange’ to the ‘superb’: I certainly wasn’t able to get a comprehensive overview of Chinese wines within the space of a few days, but I now know where it all starts and where it ends, in which region you’ll find the best wines, who the most popular producers are and what we can expect from China in the future in terms of quality, quantity and, indeed, architecture...

When I first set foot on Chinese soil at Beijing airport, I didn’t know anything (yet) about Chinese wine. Up until this point, I didn’t have the foggiest idea about fermented grape juice from the Middle Kingdom because I’d never tasted their wines – although I’d sampled at least 100,000 wines from the rest of the world. But, as I often tell myself: “curiosity is your best guide.”

After the byzantine immigration procedure, I first had to go to another terminal to collect my suitcase. Then through customs, then through another checkpoint where the suitcase would be X-rayed.

Then I had to wait for ages in a long and jostling queue for yet another security check. Funnily enough, the sensor was adjusted in such a way that the alarm would go off for every single passenger and hence each of us had to endure a metal detector body search. Three hours later, I eventually boarded (in yet another terminal) an Air China aircraft for my connecting flight to Yinchuan.

Lenz Moser met me at Yinchuan airport. He was the one who had actually lured me to China. I know Lenz from his time as European sales manager at Mondavi. Back then, at Mövenpick, we were doing rather big deals. Later, I met him a few times in Austria in the context of his passionate “Grüner Veltliner” project. And now we were in the car, driving from Yinchuan Airport to the only really good hotel in this city of two million: the Kempinski, in which I stayed for two days – luckily at the special Moser discount!

Somehow or other, he told me, he has been involved with China and Chinese wine, on and off, for eleven years and now he’s in the thick of it.

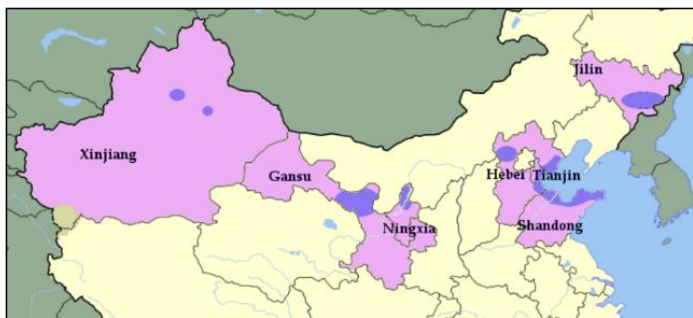
A COUNTRY WITHOUT WINE LAW

China is a very, very old wine country. A wine-like substance estimated to originate from approximately 7000 BCE was found in a Neolithic excavation site in Jahu (Henan Province). This substance is regarded as the oldest evidence of wine production in the world.

The first written mention of wine cultivation stems from the time of the Tang dynasty (7th century). About five centuries later, Marco Polo reported on an excellent wine from the Taiyuan region.

Things took off properly when, in 1892, the diplomat Zhang Bishi founded a winery in Yantai. This pioneering project still exists today and, with about 20 wineries in each of the important wine regions, it is, indeed, the “top dog” of the Chinese oenology scene. The mega-group has also acquired wineries in France (Château Liversan, Philippe le Hardy) and in Sicily.

But there is no wine law in China! More often than not, Chinese wine was, and still is, blended with a disproportionate percentage of foreign wine. But, even so, it's still regarded as ‘Chinese’ wine! With the increasing popularity of foreign wines, this is, however, unlikely to still be the case today. Furthermore, the government will intervene when things get out of hand: in 2010, the authorities closed 30 wineries in the Hebei region after a big scandal involving adulteration and fraudulent labelling.



Grape cultivation is mainly found in the northern part of the country. The most important regions are Xinjiang, Gansu, Ningxia, Shandong, Hebei, Tianjin, Yantai and Jilin. Jilin borders on North Korea and is known for its ice wines. Based on my own tasting experience, I would consider Ningxia the best wine region.



ACREAGE AND PRODUCTION

Figures are hard to come by and have to be interpreted somehow. As Winston Churchill once stated: “I only believe in statistics that I doctored myself.”

From 2010 to 2015, the area under vines has increased from 539,000 to 830,000 hectares. This means China is world number two behind Spain! However, this has to be put into perspective, because vine cultivation is not only done to produce wine but also hard liquor, grapes and raisins. Therefore, despite the huge acreage, China currently ranks sixth in terms of wine production.

EUROPEAN GRAPES

More than 90% of the grapes go to making red wines, with Cabernet being by far the unchallenged number one. There is really good Cabernet Sauvignon and there is Cabernet Gernischt, which presumably is a cross of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc or Carmenère. However, due to its green base notes, the Cabernet Gernischt has recently fallen out of favour, and this situation is likely to last. Merlot is on the rise. A few winemakers absolutely love Marselan – and are more-or-less successful. Furthermore, there are some minor supporting actors such as Gamay, Malbec, Pinot Noir and Syrah.

White wines are enjoying increasing popularity and demand. The largest percentage of acreage is cultivated with “Italian Riesling”, a relative of Welschriesling. Chardonnay is experiencing a boom, but (so far) on a fairly small scale. Further white grapes: Müller-Thurgau, Muscatel, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Sylvaner and Vidal.

CONSUMPTION AND SALES

More than 90% of the wines produced are consumed in China. In 2013, Xi Jinping, the new and popular president, came into power and started to fight corruption. This, together with an obvious economic crisis, has led to a drop in domestic sales, which have only very slightly gone up again recently.

Imported wines, on the other hand, are very popular. Everything coming from other countries is in great demand: watches, cars, fashion... and wine. While there is a 20% import duty on all foreign wines, the wines from Chile enjoy a special status due to mutual trade relations: no taxes are levied. Last year, import figures rose by 50% (but against a fairly low starting point).

Hence, the large producers are counting on future exports. However, the big export business has not really taken off yet and neither is it going to be easy.



One thing has to be said first: the wines have a clearly European flavour and there are (or there could be) good-to-excellent quality wines. But, unfortunately, the winemakers have little experience with exports and hence no network. Additionally, there is long-established and tough competition on the world market. Besides, most labels would have to be drastically redesigned to make the wines fit for presentation on foreign shelves.



MARKET PRICES

I wanted to find out, so I went to a supermarket and got myself the cheapest wine available. It cost me 10 yuan, which are 1.50 euros. In the evening, we wanted to try this vintageless 'Merlot Trouvaille'. But it smelled rather musty and we could only bear it on the palate for a few seconds.

At another place, I found the most expensive bottles, which came at about 350 euros. I was told that these used to be given as presents to party members and that, today, these wines were no longer in fashion due to the corruption controls.

One thing that struck me was that the wineries have stupidly expensive consumer prices for wine lovers. Compared to the European markets, at these prices, the wines would have absolutely no chance. However, because the economic situation has changed dramatically, we are likely to see much lower prices in the near future.

Smaller wineries, which have a domain character and an annual production of about 100,000 bottles, sell their wines at the right prices but here, too, there will be no bargains. White wines for about 50 euros per bottle and reds between 50 and 100 euros are quite common.

Ten years ago, the Chinese consumed about two decilitres of wine per person per year. Today this figure has risen to one litre. What this increase amounts to when multiplied by about 1.4 billion people is easy to translate into a trend for the coming years ...



CHANDON: CHINA BUBBLES SINCE 2013

The Moët & Chandon parent company was founded in 1743 by Claude Moët. Since 1987, the internationally acclaimed champagne producer has belonged to the LVMH group (Louis Vuitton, Moët, Hennessy).

The former owners had already expanded the business in clever ways. The aim was always to launch a high-quality sparkling wine in a booming wine country under the Chandon brand that would guarantee great marketing potential, and to launch the wine exclusively in each country.

The first project started in 1959 in Argentina, followed by Brazil and California in 1973. In 1986, the first Chandon bubbles appeared in Australia and in 2013, the dynamic group opened two new 'Bubble Wineries' in India and, with great fanfare, in China.

The winery covers 67 hectares, with half of the area dedicated to Chardonnay and the other half to Pinot Noir. The vines were planted in 2011 and in 2014 the first production output was launched.

The prices seem to be quite attractive: the Brut costs 168 yuan (23 euros) and the Rosé comes at 198 yuan (27 euros). Presumably, we will also see vintage sparkling wines or special cuvées over the next few years.

Brut Methode Traditionelle Chandon:

Chardonnay. Medium yellow. Subtle floral bouquet. Very fine mousse on the palate with taste and style reminiscent of 'Sekt'. But very nice and enjoyable. 16/20, drink now

Brut Rosé Methode Traditionelle Chandon:

Pinot Noir. Beautiful salmon colour. Very lively mousse, persistent perlage. Juicy body, soft acidity, well balanced and long. This is a very classy variant, absolutely Champagne class. 18/20, drink now

TRAVEL AND TASTING REPORT

So, let's talk about the wines now. Let's start with sparkling wines (see left), followed by a few domain descriptions and also by descriptions of individual wines tasted during lunch or dinner.

Finally: dessert in the form of fantastic ice wines.

And also a few stories and pictures featuring crazy 'chateaux', as well as an unbelievable story about a gigantic imperial wine city, due to be opened next year in Yantai.



MOSER'S NEW CHINA PROJECT

The story isn't new because it has happened before in the history of Changyu. About one hundred years ago, the Austrian consul Baron Max von Babo was contracted as winemaker. He imported barrels and presses from Austria and led the winery to international acclaim.

With Lenz Moser, another Austrian is now in charge of helping a very special new winery in the Changyu group. The first Changyu-Moser vintages are now being launched. Let's see what they taste like and let's hear more about the ambitious vision...

2015 Italian Riesling Moser XV Ningxia:

about 8 euros. Very light yellow with subtle green accents. A berry bouquet of intense fruit with a delicate note of sweetness. On the palate quite fat (for a Riesling), a smooth but also crisp acidity and a soft noble-bitter finish. Also ideal with food. At any rate, there is a clear European pattern of flavours. 16/20, drink now



2015 Rosé Cabernet Merlot Moser XV: about 8 euros. Light pink. Open, slightly sweet bouquet, rose petals, a hint of grenadine and rose hip. Fresh on the palate (fine addition of carbon dioxide!), juicy and very quaffable. Absolutely delightful. For me this was one of the best rosé wines I've had for quite a long time. 17/20, drink now

2015 Cabernet Sauvignon Moser XV Ningxia: about 8 euros. Full and rather dark garnet. Aged in a steel tank. Why do I mention this? Because there is a caramel note in the nose. And so I asked again and was again assured that this wine had never seen any wood whatsoever. Starts with a wonderful plummy bouquet, a subtle stalky note, hints of clove and liquorice, altogether very aromatic, indicative of a warm, mature Cabernet. Velvety and smooth on the palate and hence with matured, yet present, tannins; still slightly coarse flow, showing the wine's reserves. Mega value for money and especially perfect for Cabernet fans who are on an anti-barrique mission. At this level, there is practically no "wood-free" Cabernet on market. With 500,000 bottles, this is the foremost wine in the Moser-production. 17/20, drink now

2010 Cabernet Sauvignon Moser Family Ningxia: about 25 euros. Production: ca. 200,000 bottles. Medium-dark burgundy with a brighter ruby rim. Open bouquet, you may think it's a Chilean due to hints of cassis and eucalyptus. Fine and juicy on the palate, wonderfully balanced and hence with a harmonious flow, with an elderberry and blueberry finish. A little unconventional but very good. 17/20, drink up

TRADITIONAL VINIFICATION

No cold maceration, no too-cold fermentation, no malolactic degradation of acidity in the new barrique, developed in not too many new French oak barrels: the Moser Cabernets taste like classic Cabernet Sauvignon!

2013 Cabernet Sauvignon Moser Family Ningxia: ca. 25 euros. Full, dark garnet, only slightly brightening. Shows dark toasted notes, chocolate nuances, prunes and a nice open bouquet. Dense palate with an amazing depth, something like terroir in the form of summer truffles. Wow! You could include this wine in pretty high class Cabernet blind tastings and it would be the best value for money among the best ones. 17/20, drink now

2013 Château Changyu Moser XV Ningxia: ca. 50 euros. 100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Intense, very spicy bouquet, lots of dark chocolate, eucalyptus, notes of mint, currants and blackcurrants. On the palate, it first displays a velvety smoothness, concentrated extract with a fine body, shows great length due to well-integrated acidity and wonderful balance. This wine clearly belongs to the premium category already! An amazing Cabernet. 18/20, start to drink now



Breaking new 'terroir' at age 60: born in 1956, Lenz Moser (above) has set himself an ambitious goal with his dedicated Chinese wine project in collaboration with the Changyu-Equipe. Interview on the next page...

René Gabriel: Why does a very ostentatious, 50 million-euro castle in China bear the name “Moser”?

Lenz Moser: It’s an incredible story. At least for me. Eleven years ago, I travelled to China for the first time in order to sell my Austrian wines there. I met the directors of the Changyu company and fell in love with the country. I think that all of us can learn a lot from China.”

Gabriel: And in this short space of time you’ve become the owner of a castle?

Moser: No, the castle doesn’t belong to me. I run a joint enterprise with the owners of Changyu. The château is only the – admittedly rather showy – flagship symbol.

Gabriel: And how did this incredible deal come about?

Moser: Over the years, I became friends with the Changyu directors and, six years ago, we had the idea of launching a new independent line together. Wines of high quality, wines that were fit for export and able to prove that Chinese wines could take on the international competition.

Gabriel: Changyu owns wineries in almost all of the important regions. So, why did you choose Ningxia?

Moser: At the time, five chateaux were being built. I could choose one. So, I took a good look at both the characteristics of the terroir and the climate. The vineyards are located at a height of about 1,100 metres and, with a total of 3,000 hours of sunshine (compared to 2,200 in Bordeaux) and very little rain, Ningxia offers top conditions.

Gabriel: Did you start with young vines?

Moser: No! I can choose from the best vineyards from the neighbouring winery (also owned by Changyu). And all of these vines are 10 to 20 years old.

Gabriel: And what’s the goal, what’s the vision for the future?

Moser: Achieving a high quality standard – with all of our wines, from the cheapest to the most expensive one. That’s why I oversee the production from the vineyard through to bottling. The biggest problem is consistent quality management. In this point the Chinese tend to be a bit lax. The next step is to produce Cabernets that can hold their own in the global market. With our 2013 vintage, we are very well on our way. And with our sensational 2015 vintage, which is still maturing in its barrels, we have come, I believe, very close to meeting our goal. I’m already looking forward to launching this wine.

Gabriel: And who will take over the marketing?

Moser: That’s exactly the greatest potential in this joint project. Due to my former activities, I know the global market very well and have excellent connections for marketing the Changyu-Moser wines.

Gabriel: So, this is first and foremost an export project?

Moser: There are 1,500 five-star hotels in China already. And currently they hardly offer any Chinese wines. Also, we want to be one of the domestic leaders in the Cabernet market and hence we have a huge chance to become very successful in China, too. And, not least, the longstanding relationships created by the huge Changyu sales network are a great help to me.

Gabriel: Judging from the tasting, the first wines launched are of a very good quality. What about the quantitative potential?

Moser: The first launch comprises one million bottles. We could have produced much more of the standard wines. With the top Cabernet, I only want the very best, hence we’ve been careful with that one. We will only produce larger amounts if we are able to improve even more. At the moment, the focus is also on offering the better quality wines at a lower price. We are absolutely aware of the huge competition, but we definitely have bottled a most amazing Cabernet!

SILVER HEIGHTS: CHINESE-FRENCH ALLIANCE

Silver Heights is a young and modest winery. The first vintage that was bottled was the 2007. Currently, the winery produces about 50,000 bottles.

Emma Gao is the owner. Her husband Thierry Courtade is responsible for the grapes and wines. He used to work at Château Calon-Ségur in Bordeaux.

The Family Reserve Chardonnay can be described as ‘Chinese Burgundy’. It was first bottled in 2013, from one single barrique that came to 300 bottles. In 2014, this figure had risen to 3,000 and the 2015 vintage is expected to produce 5,700 bottles. This is, however, likely to be close to the production limit.



2014 Family Reserve Chardonnay, Silver Heights Helan Mountains, Ningxia: very elegant bouquet, light yellow fruit, citrus notes, a fine floral hint and notes of acacia. Juicy on the palate, wonderfully integrated acidity, very fresh in the sense of being slightly reminiscent of Puligny style. If you didn't know that this Chardonnay was from China, you could easily believe it was white Burgundy when tasted blind. 17/20, drink now

2015 Emma's Reserve Helan Mountains, Silver Heights: ca. 50 euros. A selection from the Summit production. Only available direct from the winery. Barrel sample. 100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Medium-dark ruby, with a slightly sweet bouquet of red berries, raspberries, cranberries and red cherries, subtle pepper notes. Very fine and elegant on the palate, silky texture. A well-balanced wine with aromas between Burgundy and Margaux. The finesse is greater than its general power. 18/20, drinkable soon



ZIHUIYUANSI: A DIFFICULT START

The stonewalled winery looks both simple and showy at the same time. If you know a thing or two about architecture, once you're inside the building you will notice, if you haven't already, that no half measures were taken: there's a lot of stone and wood, with everything being arranged to look like a work of art.

Construction started in 2008 and, in 2014, the winery was opened. Production comes to about 150,000 bottles. There is no wine on the market yet.

Everything here is Chinese. There are no European labels because, for the time being, the entire production is for the Chinese market only.

I was not particularly enthusiastic about the design of the bottle, nor about its content. Everything is more about looks than substance and my evaluation for the wines is an unenthusiastic 15/20 or 16/20 tops.

The Chardonnay was OK but pretty run-of-the mill, somewhat boring.

The two red lines are called: Son of Mountains and Soul of Mountains.

The premium wine is supposed to come at 100 euros, direct from the winery. Hence it is in the super premium segment – but only with regards to price.

To me, all reds tasted fruitless, rough, unfinished and were totally devoid of harmony.

This will be a difficult start because the competitors we visited on the same day – and were therefore able to compare on the basis of fresh impressions – were (a) better, (b) cheaper and (c) already established.



JIABEILAN, PALMER-EXPERIENCE

Founded in 2005, this winery is firmly in the hands of a woman! The owner, Li de Mei, stayed at Château Palmer to study the craft. Jiabeilan ranks among China's top wineries and focuses entirely on Cabernet variants.

That doesn't mean, however, that they wouldn't try other grapes. "I do a little experiment each year" said Li when we visited her and she showed us two small Pinot Noir barrels. She had bought the grapes in addition to her standard ones. The wine was remarkably good and had a clear Pinot character. But I don't think that Pinot will become a serious contender in the long run. It's simply too hot for that.

2013 Qing Xue Jiabeilan Helan Qingxue Vineyard, Ningxia: 60 % Cabernet Sauvignon, 40 % Merlot. Full, dense purple. A special, attractive bouquet; in the nose you clearly notice the Merlot influence with notes of red plum; the fruit is fully ripe and shows great spice. Full in the mouth, dense extract, notes of Giandjua chocolate, creamy flow. A wine with a hint of sensuousness and of great provenance. Super value for money. 17/20, drink now

2013 Cabernet Sauvignon Jiabeilan Helan Qingxue Vineyard, Ningxia: 80 % Cabernet Sauvignon, 15 % Merlot, 5 % Cabernet Gernischt. Unbelievably dense purple, you can almost see hints of black. Spicy bouquet, subtle smoky notes, cloves, crushed black peppercorns framed by dark dry berry. Dense on the palate, concentrated extract, hints of fine green spice from the Cabernet Gernischt, stalky component; shows muscular tannins in the finish that combine with the acidity. Presents itself, somehow, as a classic and needs flavourful food and more time in the bottle. Decant for two hours. 17/20, drink now



A star without airs and graces: in the space of ten years, Li de Mei has set Jiabeilan on the right course.

2013 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve Jiabeilan Helan Qingxue Vineyard, Ningxia: 100 % Cabernet Sauvignon. 13,000 bottles. Price direct from winery for consumers: 75 euros. Dark purple with scarlet accents, very saturated in the centre. Shows a very deep bouquet and hence needs quite a lot of time to open, smoky notes, cloves, Szechuan pepper, currants, dark dried plum peel; the intense fruit components all recall black berries. Full on the palate, meaty, shows a noble yet simultaneously still demanding astringency, fantastic finish. A demanding, deep and, presumably, long-lasting world-class wine! Its characteristics cannot be compared to the Maremma, the Médoc or the Napa, hence this is an original icon of Chinese Cabernet red winemaking. 19/20, drink now

P.S.: The 2009 Reserve won the Decanter Wine Trophy. This was not only a legendary milestone for the winery but also very good news for China's wine history.





KANAAN: WINE MADE WITH THE HELP OF GOD

The owner's real name is Fang Wang but her friends simply refer to her as 'Crazy Fang'. This winery embarked on its winemaking adventure in 2011. Production comes to about 90,000 bottles.

Kanaan? Wasn't that the Biblical story of the marriage at Canaan? In each of the winery's rooms there's at least one Bible; most of the time there are several copies.

"I am very devoted to God. God guides me and has given me both the mission and the strength to lead this winery."

While staying in Germany, Fang fell in love with Riesling. Therefore, she's the only one in China who produces 'real Riesling', not what is referred to in the country as 'Italian Riesling'. This may also be one of the reasons why she's called 'Crazy Fang'.

Her Pretty Pony won the Asian Regional Red Wine Trophy.

2015 Riesling Ningxia Helan Mountain, Kanaan Winery: a brightening yellow with a greenish hue. A fine trace of sweetness, mild bouquet with a nice fruity touch. Shows well-integrated acidity on the palate, grainy texture, aromatic finish. Enjoyable. Against the climate, but well done. 16/20, drink now

2014 Wild Pony Ningxia Helan Mountain, Kanaan Winery: Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Gernischt, Merlot. Fairly transparent ruby. Open, half fruity, half vegetative bouquet with damson notes. Juicy on the palate, smooth and quaffable, with notes of dark plum peel in the finish. A nice entry-level wine, but not really at Kanaan standard. 15/20, drink now

2014 Pretty Pony Helan Mountain, Kanaan Winery: 90 % Cabernet Sauvignon, 10 % Merlot. Medium ruby-garnet. The bouquet is very spicy with a cool underpinning and provides a nice Cabernet aroma. Long and elegant on the palate, finely grained texture. The aromatic powerful finish is underscored by black peppercorns and cassis. 17/20, start drinking now

2012 Black Beauty Helan Mountain, Kanaan Winery: just short of 100 euros, direct from the winery. 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Merlot. Production: 4,500 bottles. Matt purple, ruby rim. Intense bouquet with a light earthy touch and notes of blood. Grainy texture on the palate, feels hard and not (yet) rounded. The power is there as are promises of a great wine, but this one was too difficult to evaluate. I also wasn't sure whether there wasn't a slight bit of cork. No rating.

2013 Black Beauty Helan Mountain, Kanaan Winery: 60 % Cabernet Sauvignon, 40 % Merlot. Fermented in French oak barriques for 18 months. Production: ca. 5,500 bottles. Rich purple, very dense colour. Intense berry bouquet of mulberries, raspberries, a hint of cranberries and amarena cherries; shows a nicely toasty sweetness and is very complex in the nose. Very big on the palate, again showing wonderful concentration, well-balanced. The finish displays powerful aromas and is very concentrated. Still too young, but with great potential. Considering that this wine was made from very young vines, this is a masterstroke that shows the region's potential. Decant for two hours. In terms of the base flavours, I think this wine has an affinity to Colgin. 18/20, start drinking now



"Crazy" Fang Wang proposes but God disposes ...



LI LAN: SWAPPING FASHION FOR WINE

Shao Quingsong was a fashion designer before deciding to make wine.

First he planted vines (they are now 10 years old), then he built himself a château (completed in 2014). 2011 was his first vintage. Annual production: ca. 100,000 bottles. The winery is called Li Lan – and the wines are called Lan Cui.

2014 Cabernet Sauvignon Lan Cui, Li Lan: barrel sample. Price direct from winery: ca. 45 euros. Very dark, matt burgundy. Dry, slightly woody bouquet with floral notes. Feels tart on the palate at the beginning, the acidity is not yet well integrated into the fleshy extract; the finish reveals a spicy touch. A good wine that would probably need more roundedness. 17/20, needs more time

2012 Cabernet Sauvignon Lan Cui, Li Lan: sold out. Medium-dark garnet-purple. Superb bouquet with a red berry note, sour cherries and candied raspberries, with notes of rooibus underpinned with ‘sufficient’ toasty notes. Velvety on the palate, shows a lot of meat and has – like all the wines tasted – a peppery note at the tip of the tongue, fine-grained flow. Besides the subtle astringency, there is still a strong wood presence. Decant. 17/20, drink now

2015 Lan Cui semi sweet Chardonnay Italian Riesling Lan Cui, Li Lan: medium yellow with lime green nuances, brilliant. Pleasant, slightly sweet bouquet with nuanced layers, honeydew melon and also floral notes. Good body on the palate, besides yellow fruit, there are also aromas of rose petals, pleasant finish. An unconventional wine but I can see it going well with many different Chinese dishes. 17/20, drink now

WINERY VISITS: RATHER DIFFICULT

I won’t name the winery here, but this example is representative of many visits.

I simply would like to point out that, in China, it is not (yet) the norm to get a chronological presentation when you visit a winery.

“Thank you for visiting our winery!”

“Can we taste something?”

“You want to taste something? What do you want to taste?”

“The most important wine in your range, certainly!”

“That’s the Reserve, you want to try it?”

“Yes, that one too, but I mean the most important wine in terms of production!”

“The Reserve is our most important wine in terms of production!”

“No, I mean in terms of volume, of sales.”

“That’s not the Reserve, that’s another one!”

“Yes, this other one is the one I would like to taste.”

“Certainly, sir. And the Reserve, don’t you want to try that one too?”

“Yes, I would – the Reserve too. And maybe also barrel samples so we can get an idea of what the future holds.”

“We actually never do barrel samples with visitors, but we can do it, if you really want to.”

“Yes, I really would like to!”

Often, there is no website. A tasting list is nowhere to be found. There is no pricing information. You have to go through the trouble of deciphering the wine’s names from the label. You simply don’t expect that from a professional winery visit! Hence, for Chinese wineries, there’s still a lot of potential for improvement!



DINNER WINES AT THE KEMPINSKI

Raw tripe anyone? Tasted quite 'special' but not all bad. Not to try it would be regarded as downright impolite in China.

Still, I wouldn't have tried it but I was given the honour of sitting right next to the party member Cao Kailongdem. He is responsible for the "grape deputy development" and he invited us for dinner at the Kempinski in Yinchuan. And when you are sat to his right, then you are his guest of honour.

This comes with the advantage, and disadvantage, that you do not need to help yourself from the endless stream of dishes arriving on the large round turntable because the host 'feeds' the guest of honour. My first course: raw tripe. Actually, it wasn't too bad at all ...



2012 Italian Riesling Reserve Château Yunme Great Wall: ca. 60 euros. Pale, bright yellow. Underpinned by oak notes, fruity but too much body for a Riesling and not showing sufficient direct fruit. A sorrel aroma on the palate, but rather flaccid. This wine is really for the Chinese market only because in Europe no-one would pay that kind of money for such a mediocre white wine. 15/20, drink now

2014 Marselan, Puschang: ca. 60 euros. Medium ruby. Very unconventional floral bouquet, a marked sweetness in the nose, reminiscent of a Ripasso. Spicy on the palate, liquorice, dark noble wood, peppery acidity; unconventional but not uninteresting. 17/20, drink now

P.S. Marselan is a cross between Cabernet Sauvignon and Grenache Noir. In China, this wine has true fans.

2012 Domaine Cheng Cheng Ningxia: ca. 75 euros. 75 % Cabernet Sauvignon, 25 % Merlot. Very dark colour, purple with hints of almost black. Smoke, soy sauce, dried black mushrooms, extremely complex and also slightly oxidative. Intense on the palate with well-integrated astringency. Feels young, boisterous, rough and therefore still lacks depth. This is a rough diamond that still needs to mature in the bottle to come into its own and therefore I think that this wine has very good potential. A rather tannic bulldozer that certainly stands out. Rating for the nose: 16/20; for the palate: 18/20, start drinking now



2012 Cabernet Sauvignon Château Yuquan: This wine comes from the oldest state-owned winery. Deep garnet-purple. Complex bouquet, smoky notes, black olives, dark chocolate, mint and showing a wonderful Cabernet spice. The fragrance is reminiscent of an artisanal Médoc. Very long on the palate, everything is black berries, mature and balanced, very long and aromatic finish. Not fat but – if you can say that of a wine from this region – a great classic. This wine has touched me and shown me that Ningxia is not only a fitting home for Cabernet but also that this region might even have the potential to produce legends. This wine is not perfectly produced but maybe that's what makes it so special. Decant for two hours. Lenz didn't like it – I did. 18/20, drink now



Impressive road leading up to the Yuquan winery.

HELAN MOUNTAIN: STATE-OWNED, HALF STATE-OWNED, SOLD

Everything between evolution and revolution is possible in Chinese viticulture.

Helan Mountain used to be a 100% state-owned company, located in the Ningxia region. Then the French Pernot-Ricard group acquired 50% and eventually took over the whole company in 2012.



At the moment, the winery looks like a run-down factory and is currently operating at only 25% of capacity.

This is due to a large area of the vineyards being replanted.

In a few months' time, the buildings will be completely refurbished to create a beautiful winery including a boutique and a competence centre.



We were received by a delegation of four, all wearing the same T-shirts, because Pernot-Ricard was celebrating “Responsib-All-Day”.

We were allowed to taste barrel samples of the 2015 vintage: Chardonnay (one of the best in China), Merlot (very well done but not particularly sexy) and Cabernet Sauvignon. The latter tasted quite ‘Australian’ and reminded me of the Wolf-Blass Black Label: a lot of oak, coconut and chocolate complemented with a little rosemary and eucalyptus. That was a real Cabernet bombshell!



NINGXIA – HOT WINE REGION

What you have read so far concerns almost entirely Ningxia wines.

On December 14, 2011 a blind tasting was conducted in Beijing – against similarly priced wines from Bordeaux. After the tasting of a high level jury the results did surprise the public. 4 of 5 top wines came from Ningxia. The winner was a wine from Grace Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon Chairman’s Selection 2009.

At this moment there are ca. 30,000 ha under vines in Ningxia and 80 wineries operating. Ca. 50 wineries are under construction. In the next 10 years the plan is to increase the acreage to 60,000 ha (half the size of Bordeaux). Interest in vineyard land is high as Ningxia has the status of China’s Cabernet Sauvignon ‘Eldorado’.



SLANTED!

A 60-degree temperature difference between summer and winter: you will hardly find that in any other wine region anywhere in the world.

In the summer temperatures rise up to 35 degrees while, in the winter, they can drop to minus 25. For this reason, the vines are completely covered with soil during the winter. This is easier if the vines don’t stand up straight...



CHANGYU: IT ALL STARTED IN 1892

It's referred to as the beginning of the 'modern history' of Chinese wine.

In 1892, the diplomat Zhan Bishi founded his winery in Yantai, calling his company Zhan Yu Wine Company.

Since then, the company has grown enormously and is regarded as both the oldest and most progressive company in China's wine industry. Six different wineries are located in various regions and the company has also invested in foreign projects, as mentioned earlier.

There are no exact figures on the production output, but I've heard a figure of 150 million bottles being mentioned. It could be many more, however.

At the moment, the company is expanding on an enormous scale: flashy, gigantic châteaux are being built, one after the other. The picture above shows Changyu Castle. I've already talked about Chateau Changyu Moser XV. In 2005, the company built Chateau Changyu Afip, which is a one-hour car drive away from Beijing and not exactly a modest structure either. In 2016, Yantai Changyu International Wine City will be opened. This project will exceed everything that has so far been imaginable in terms of scale and will outdo any existing wine centres around the world.

The product range is huge, which is why I'll only present a small cross-section here...

2012 Riesling dry white Wine Changyu: ca. 15 euros. Quantity: a few million bottles. Medium yellow. Slightly sweet bouquet, notes of honey, raisins, nettles, camomile, fragrant. Juicy palate, subtle acidity and you still find certain citrus notes, too. Good and quaffable, no more. Fresher would be better! But absolutely fine for a mass-produced wine. 15/20, drink now

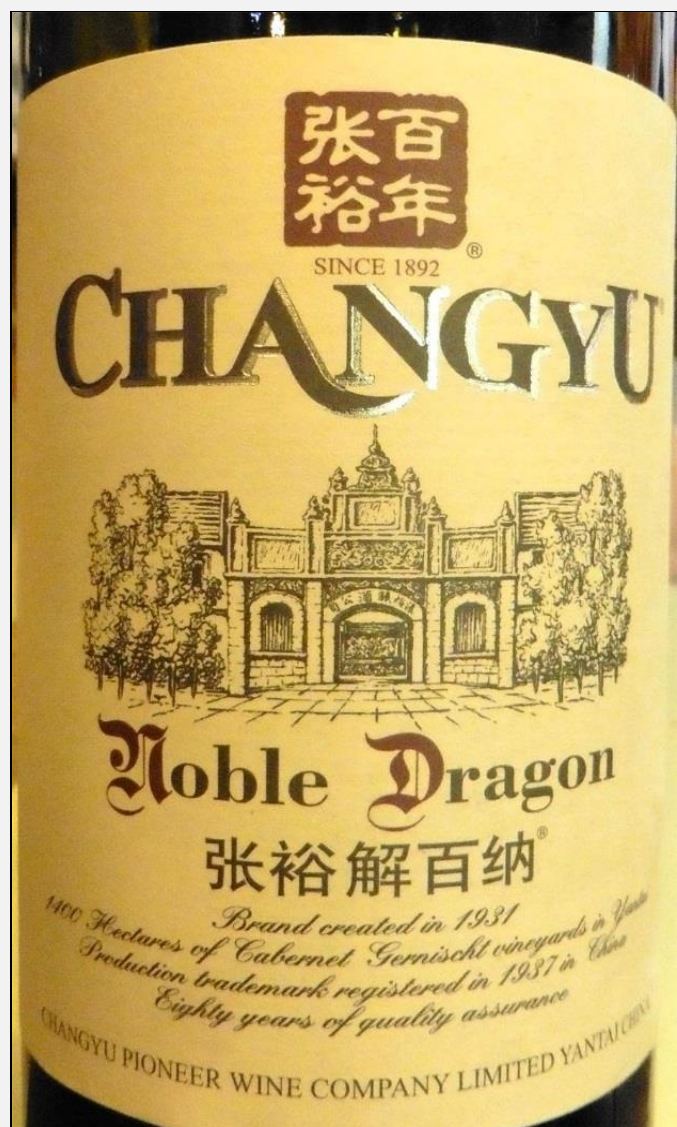
2011 Chardonnay Changyu: ca. 50 euros. Medium yellow with lime green nuances, brilliant. Open bouquet, a touch of sweetcorn at the beginning, followed by yellow fruit notes with a slightly tropical touch, followed by subtle honey notes with the wood staying discretely in the background. Altogether, the nose could be more aromatic. Milky on the palate, smooth flow, rather deep acidity, strong yellow fruit here; rich, but also a bit flabby. Old-fashioned Californian style. Category: Chardonnay-Bluff. 16/20, drink now

2009 Cabernet Gernischt Chateau Changyu Castel: ca. 50 euros. Production: 50,000 bottles. Maturing purple. This seems to be the classic Cabernet Gernischt-bouquet, ranging from green peppercorns, to tobacco leaf and to unripe plums; spicy but also a bit closed if you're used to a mature Cabernet. Shows muscle on the palate, underscored with notes of dark chocolate, black peppercorn and elderberry, with tannins in the finish. The Cabernet Gernischt is a special class of wine – for an equally special minority, I think. 16/20, drink now

2008 Baron Balboa Chateau Changyu: ca. 45 euros. 100% Cabernet Sauvignon: very dark but fully matured burgundy, matt. Earthy, malty, chocolate notes, Malaga raisins, Brazilian tobacco; in terms of nose it seems to have reached the tertiary phase already. On the palate reminiscent of an artisanal Médoc-Bourgeois, coarse and with lots of tobacco and notes of horse saddle in the finish, harsh. 16/20, past drinking stage



Before starting with the big wine tasting, we visited the Changyu Wine Museum in Yantai: Kiki helped us to have some photo-shoot fun ...



430 MILLION BOTTLES!!!

The first Noble Dragon vintage was the 1931. On a total area of 1,400 hectares, 700 winemakers are responsible for two hectares of vines each. This is how an annual output of ca. 25 million bottles of Noble Dragon is produced. The wine is sold in China at a price equivalent to about 14 euros.

The total production since 1931 comes to 430 million bottles. You have to really take in that figure, which is completely unparalleled in the wine industry...

2013 Noble Dragon Changyu: 60% Cabernet Gernischt, 40% Cabernet Sauvignon. Medium-dark ruby, quite dark in the centre. Very spicy bouquet, lots of ripe damsons, smoky notes, dried cloves. Underpinned by cool Cabernet notes and traces of eucalyptus, jostaberry and herbaceous shrubs. Juicy on the palate, quaffable, very pleasant tannins, aromatic finish. Superb Chinese red wine value that shows that mass-produced wine can also come at a class that's worth its price. 16/20, drink now



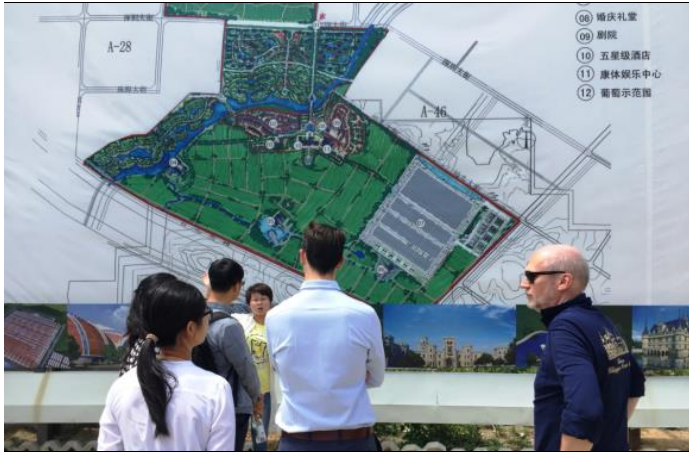
CHATEAU AFIP: A MAGNIFICENT CHATEAU NEAR BEIJING

2009 Chateau Changyu Afip Global: ca. 70 euros. 100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Medium garnet, showing elegant maturity, becoming significantly brighter. Starts with dark berries, black peppercorn, cassis, blackberries, summer truffles. Then reveals notes of wild rosemary and feels like a classic Bordeaux in the nose. Creamy palate, wonderfully underpinned by malt, slightly oaky traces of coconut, very elegant tannins, ends long and absolutely balanced. A noble, delicate and smooth classy Cabernet. Can compete with many great world-class Cabernets but would have to be counted in the finesse class. I think this wine has reached its peak but, due to its superb balance, it will keep for a long time. Would be interesting to taste it again in ten years' time. 18/20, drink now

P.S. 1: This wine has been available since 2005. If you say 'Afip' and think of Lafite, then you'll recognise a certain phonetic similarity. But this is just a coincidence!

P.S. 2: Afip was launched exactly at the time when the Lafite boom peaked in China. But that, too, was only a coincidence, surely!





YANTAI CHANGYU INTERNATIONAL WINE CITY: XXXXXXXXXXXXL

For clothes sizes we usually have S (small), M (medium) and L (large). As humans have become taller (or fatter), new sizes had to be invented: first, we had XL, then XXL.

The Yantai Changyu International Wine City, which is currently being built and will open in 2017, defies all traditional size indicators. Therefore I've added a few more X's in the title, hoping that this will help to illustrate the gigantic scale of this mega-project.

The Wine City covers an area of 450 hectares, of which 300 are planted with vines.

The not-exactly-modest remainder of 150 hectares is needed for the world's largest cellar. It will have a floor space of 27,000 square metres, equivalent to about 250 football pitches. Each of the 15 filling facilities will fill 25,000 bottles per hour. The individual vaults are shaped like barriques lying on their sides (see picture).



In addition you will find a 19 story building in this area – a tec centre à la bonheur. It resembles the shape of champagne glasses.



Approximately 500 metres away another, truly impressive Changyu chateau is being completed.



Another 500 metres and you will find the new Changyu Brandy chateau, very impressive again – resembling a true castle. Is is really big and underscores Changyu's status as the premier Brandy producer of the country.

Also under construction you will find the "Haina Wine Village" with restaurants, shops, bars and hotels. The entrance into this immense wine centre will resemble the 'Arc de Triomphe' in Paris.

KOVAC BECOMES KEYA

As early as 1894, besides grapes for wine production, Ugný Blanc was planted to produce 'Chinese Cognac'. From 1915, this product was sold as KOVAC, but its producers forgot to register the trademark rights. The French government has exercised some gentle pressure, demanding that they avoid the similarity to COGNAC in the brand's name. Thus KOVAK has now become KEYA. I've tried it and it actually tastes like a good Cognac.



THE CHINESE LAFITE SECRET

The external walls of the builders' sheds bear the sign 'DBR'. There is no indication whatsoever as to what that acronym means and to what is being built there.

'DBR' stands, in fact, for Domaines Barons de Rothschild. That's the Lafite branch. Interpreting the terms 'Wine Estate Projects' and putting that together with DBR, you arrive at the correct conclusion that the owners of Château Lafite-Rothschild quite understandably intend to build a winery.

In 2008, the Rothschilds bought about 40 hectares of land in the Penglai peninsula (Shandong Province) and immediately started to plant grapes. Simultaneously, they started to build a Chinese-style winery with a rather plain-looking exterior. However, no wine has been marketed yet and the winery is far from being completed. This is fuelling the rumour mills. Did they back the wrong horse? Malicious gossip has it that the site is located in a rather rainy spot, with most of the rain occurring just before harvest.

Many years ago, the DBR group had launched another unsuccessful Chinese project. When asked what the first harvests in Penglai had been like, Lafite boss Christophe Salin recently said: "Not bad – but not good enough!"

On our unannounced visit, a construction worker told us that the 2015 vintage was in the cellar now. It was "very good, but only a small quantity". Presumably, the company will wait until the first China-Lafite launch before completing the other buildings. Hence, for the time being, the whole thing remains a DBR secret.



AS KITSCH AS KITSCH CAN BE

I took the photo of this advertising poster at Yantai airport. The fairy-tale castle is located in this region, although it would look more at home in Disneyland than in a wine region. It's said to be a copy of a Scottish castle. The wines are produced by a family called Ramlam and the product lines are named Ram-Family and Saflam.



WORTH WATCHING: RED OBSESSION

In this exciting documentary you learn a lot about the Chinese influence in Bordeaux and in trading (predominantly at auctions) premium French wines. There is also a very informative sequence on viticulture in China. The film, *Red Obsession*, is in English and can be viewed for free on YouTube...

WORLD CHAMPIONS IN COUNTERFEITING:

as a wine expert, you will know that, in China, many Lafite bottles are being counterfeited. But there's even more! In the streets, you will see Havelange cars, which reminded me of the BMW X1. The latest China counterfeiting coup: the Land Wing, an exact copy of the latest Land Rover.

ICE WINE MADE BY CHANGYU

Changyu again! And again on a simply staggering scale. Before ice wines were produced in Lianing, which is situated to the north of North Korea, the worldwide ice wine area came to about 250 hectares. Then the Changyu team had the idea of producing ‘a bit of ice wine’ too.

After deciding to dedicate an area of 350 hectares to Vidal grapes, worldwide production of the grape was more than doubled. The Vidal grape is, by the way, a cross between Ugni Blanc and Seibel Blanc.



Absurdly, the bottles are green and the labels are printed in such a way that you can hardly read anything. But at least the content is right.

2008 Blue Diamond Golden Ice Wine Valley, Lianing: ca. 50 euros. 37.5 cl of glowing golden yellow with mustardy notes. Very intense sweet wine bouquet that immediately hits you and shows a lot of quince, dried medlar, mandarin peel and a hint of saffron. On the palate, khaki notes and dried apricot, mild acidity and a ‘fat’ sweet wine boost in the finish. 18/20, drink now

2011 Black Diamond Golden Ice Wine Valley, Lianin: ca. 80 euros. 37.5 cl glowing golden yellow with hints of orange. Intense complex bouquet, showing not only dried fruit but also spice, notes of mace, nutmeg, marzipan, candied mango. A polarising acidity on the palate, resulting in a fascinating, almost schizophrenic, interplay of acidity and sweetness; extremely long finish. A very special ice wine experience with aromas I haven’t come across before in this form. An almost unforgettable drop! 19/20, drink now



EXCLUSIVE CHINA WINE TOUR WITH LENZ MOSER AND RENE GABRIEL

Let’s go to China! In May 2019, Lenz Moser and René Gabriel will be organising a guided tour of China’s top wineries.

We will first go to Yinchuan, where we will stay at the Kempinski and will visit many of the wineries described in this article. But we will also visit the Great Wall of China.

For the second leg of our trip, we will fly to Yantai and visit the Changyu Wine Museum and the gigantic Wine City.

Start Date: Saturday, 10 May 2019

Flight: Europe – Beijing – Yinchuan

Wednesday: flight Yinchuan – Beijing – Yantai

Saturday: flight Yantai – Beijing, staying overnight in Beijing. Individual activities.

End Date: Sunday, 19 May 2019, flight back home

We will provide exact information on the flights. Flights must be booked and paid individually. A friend of mine can help with booking.

Included in the price: all transfers, accommodation (luxury class), food, wine, guided tours

Price: CHF 4,200 (double room), CHF 4,500 (single room)

Booking: as of now (non-binding); one year before the start date: definitive booking with a deposit of CHF 1,000 per person.

To book, send an email to: weingabriel@bluewin.ch