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# Victoria Moore: red dawn for Chinese wine



Château Changyu-Moser XV in Ningxia, China CREDIT: PHILIP GOSTELOW/ANZENBERGER

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The domed caps of the creamy stone towers echo those at Valençay. The cherubbed fountains (faintly) evoke the Boboli Gardens in Florence. It's magnificent. It's also brand new and, considering it was finished in 2013, after just two years of construction and at a cost of €70 million, there's only one place it could be – and that's nowhere near the Loire or the monuments of renaissance Italy, but in China.

"This is the beauty of China. If they do it, they do it big," says Lenz Moser. Château Changyu-Moser XV bears his name. This is the sort of crazy thing that happens when you get involved with China's oldest, biggest (and clearly very solvent) wine producer. "At first I didn't take them seriously," says the consultant, marketer and winemaker. "Then I saw this enormous construction site. I was slightly overwhelmed." The XV represents the fact that the Austrian is the 15th generation of his family to be involved in winemaking. The Chinese are keen on that type of thing and feel that an international winemaker – Moser has worked for Mondavi in California as well as in his native Austria – gives credibility.



The cherubbed fountains in the Changyu Chateau (faintly) evoke the Boboli Gardens in Florence CREDIT: JUAN MOYANO/ALAMY



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For Moser's part, his original interest in [China](#) – population, 1.4 billion – was its potential as a market. The idea of being a pioneer who brought Chinese wine to the rest of the world soon proved a greater lure. He has competition here, however, most notably from LVMH, which has a facility in Ningxia and releases the first vintage of Ao Yun, its upmarket Chinese red wine, this week.

**“Tasting, I feel Chinese wine has probably doubled in quality in two years – and the rate of improvement is accelerating...We can't afford not to be in there”**

Andrew Shaw

Ao Yun is based on cabernet sauvignon and comes from austere territory, a few hours from the mythical Shangri-La, close to Tibet in the remote south-west of China. LVMH believes the best grapes can be grown here, benefiting from high-altitude, UV-rich light and a long growing season of up to 150 days. There are just

2,000 cases (24,000 bottles) of the inaugural 2013 vintage and LVMH says there is little capacity for vineyard expansion. The ambition is not for volume but for a wine that confounds expectations.

By contrast, Changyu claims to be one of the world's biggest wine producers, with eight châteaux and 100 winemakers who make 150 million bottles a year. Ch Changyu-Moser, 2,000km away from Changyu HQ, is Moser's domain and, he says “completely decentralised” in terms of operations and decision-making. It produces half a million bottles a year.



A vineyard in China: China is world's fifth biggest wine consumer CREDIT: GETTY/AFP

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Putting this in the context of China's overall wine output is difficult. The International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV) places China, after Spain, as the country with the second biggest vineyard area in the world, though many say this statistic includes vineyards for table as well as wine grapes. China is also the world's fifth biggest wine consumer, but in 2014 80 per cent of wine drunk there was produced domestically. For cultural reasons, China is predominantly a red-wine consumer, though Moser is managing to import an impressive 120,000 bottles of white wine – gruner veltliner – a year.

**“Both LVMH and Moser are keen to make a red that has a distinctly Chinese taste, which has yet to be identified but might be 'spicy'”**

And while LVMH bets on Yunnan for bordeaux-style red wines, Moser, like many others, has gambled on Ningxia, an inland region about 1,200km west of Beijing.

After years of working for Changyu as a consultant he

recently stepped up his involvement, spending a chunk of time in Ningxia for the harvest for the first time in 2015. He also has a new British importer, Conviviality plc, which owns Wine Rack as well as Bibendum. I tasted three of the cabernet sauvignon-based Changyu-Moser wines this week and was surprised by the drinkability of the Moser XV Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 which is expected to retail for about £10. The Moser Family Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 (around £25) had the most pure, cassis-like, cabernet scent. I still struggle to enjoy the top-of-the-range Ch Changyu Moser XV, which is like a car crash of Fronsac. California and tannat from Uruguay.

I think the question in everyone's mind is: where is China heading and what will be most valuable? Volume, quality or both? Import or export? Both LVMH and Moser are keen to make a red that has a distinctly Chinese taste, which has yet to be identified but might be “spicy”.

Andrew Shaw, group wine buying director at Conviviality, signed up Changyu-Moser when he travelled to China in spring and says he intends to buy wines from other estates, too. He puts the conundrum in a nutshell. “Tasting, I feel Chinese wine has probably doubled in quality in two years – and the rate of improvement is accelerating. There's a huge potential blind spot on the winemaking planet that either has arrived or is going to arrive, and whoever gets in first will be able to own it. We can't afford not to be in there.”