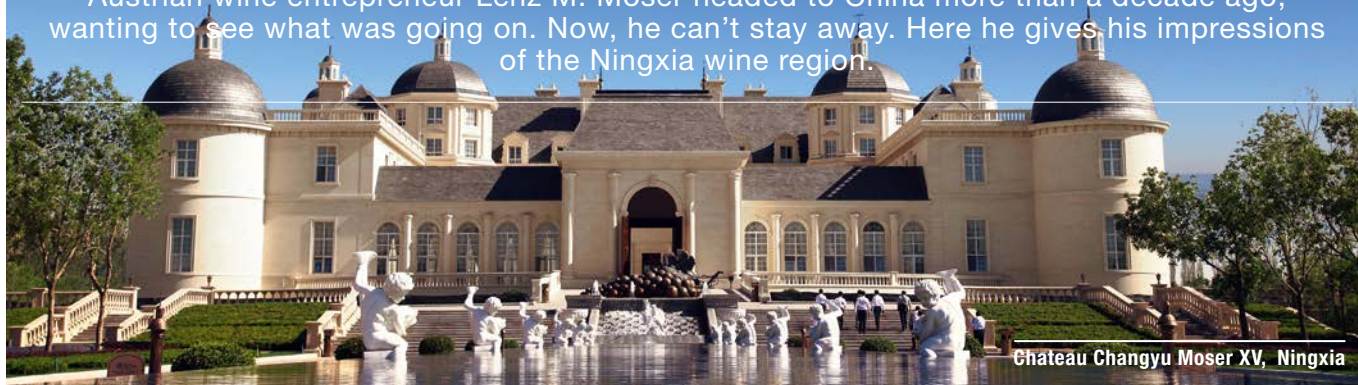


# THAT NINGXIA STYLE

Austrian wine entrepreneur Lenz M. Moser headed to China more than a decade ago, wanting to see what was going on. Now, he can't stay away. Here he gives his impressions of the Ningxia wine region.



I come from a family of winemakers who have been making wine in Niederösterreich, Austria for 15 generations. My grandfather, Professor Dr Lorenz Moser III, in the 1920s became the first ever winegrower to put vineyards on trellises, and my father started the Lenz Moser Winery where I worked as managing director for many years. I created TxB International with partners with a fine wine portfolio. TxB has super-premium wines such as Michael Mondavi Family Wines, but it also creates fine wine brands from new and interesting regions, like Turkey. I'm always looking at what's happening in the world and 11 years ago decided to go to China. The idea was to find an importer for our Laurenz V. Grüner Veltliners, yet I came home with a partnership to export Chinese wines to Europe. Today, I couldn't be happier about this great relationship – and working with a country where wine is on the cusp of becoming a beverage of choice.

## *Best in China!*

It took many visits to establish this special relationship. Nothing happens quickly, because the Chinese have to get to know you before they do business with you. After meeting with the 10 best wineries, we eventually decided to work with Changyu, in Yantai on the coast of Shandong. The winery was created by Zhang Bishi in 1892 and became the first commercial winery in China. Interestingly, back then they collaborated with another Austrian – a technical advisor called Freiherr von Babo, who helped them build the winery and brought

Carménère grapes from France – now known in China as Cabernet Gernischt.

Although it can take a long time to build relationships, you build them for life. In 2013, Changyu built a new chateau in Ningxia. They spent \$79m on it, including a museum and massive barrel hall – and then named it Chateau Changyu Moser XV. On our side, we've helped Changyu create wines that have a more European profile, and have been instrumental in getting them into European distribution. You can now buy Changyu wines at Berry Brothers in London, for example. The naming of the chateau as Moser XV clearly places an obligation on us, which is why I came for harvest 2015 in beautiful Ningxia. I'm here to help create five new wines with a special 'x factor' that will truly excite people around the globe and win consumers for China.

I'm an honorary winemaker at Changyu, so I usually go four times a year. This year, before starting my winemaking at Chateau Changyu Moser XV here in Yinchuan, I had the luxury of touring the Helan Mountain Region for two weeks. Countless talks with officials and winemakers gave a superb overview of this enormously ambitious new winegrowing region. Ningxia is still only a buzzword among Chinese wine people themselves and very few Westerners know about it. This area has about 50 mostly brand new wineries, with some 25 under construction and more planned. There are 34,000 ha of mainly red grape vineyards, which are the best in China. According to Li Xueming from the Ningxia Bureau of Grape Industry Development, the goal is clear: "Best in China and famous in the world!"

## *Ancient civilisation*

To understand the region – in the heart of Asia, south of Mongolia – it helps to understand some history. Ningxia was part of the Western Xia (or the Xia-Xia Dynasty) from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries and was repeatedly invaded by the Mongols. Yet it also benefited economically from being one of the main trading centres along the ancient silk road, which gave it the wealth to develop great arts and architecture. Even today, one-of-a kind historic landmarks can be found in this area: the Helan rock carvings are a major wonder of Chinese prehistoric civilisation; there are the Western Xia Imperial Tombs, a labyrinth of tombs with underground palaces; and the Great Wall from the Ming Dynasty, just to name a few.

According to Li Xueming, government surveys made 30 years ago revealed the perfect conditions for world-class viticulture. The foothills of the Helan Mountains offer perfect terroir, with 3,000 hours of sun (versus Bordeaux's 2,200), an altitude of 1,100 metres, and cool nights, hot days and very little rain – only 200 mL per year, yet with enough water from the Yellow River. All this has led to an economic transformation of the region through wine from the beginning, with the pace accelerating in the last 10 years. All the major Chinese wine producers have invested here.

The government also promotes the region heavily, as do the wineries (always called 'chateaus') themselves. Plans include:

- More than 60,000 ha by 2020. So far there are 34,000 ha planted, with 2m hL

## WINERIES TO WATCH

**Helan Mountain (Pernod Ricard):** After five vintages under the stewardship of brilliant Australian Craig Grafton, it produces world-class Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Big new developments in the winery and the vineyards indicate Pernod Ricard is also convinced of Ningxia's potential. The winery has 80 ha, and five quality levels, from 100 RMB to 1,000 RMB per bottle (\$15.00 to \$150.00).

**Silver Heights:** owner/winemaker Emma Gao's wines withstand any international chateau-level test with ease. The main focus is on Chardonnay and Cabernet, with 80 ha of own vineyards. Prices range from 200 RMB to 1,000 RMB.

**Jia Bei Lan:** Winemaker Zhang Jing brims with passion for Ningxia wines, delivering juicy, rich and spicy Cabernet Sauvignon (could this be the new style for Ningxia wines?). Prices from 168 RMB to 980 RMB; 23 ha of own vineyards and production of 130,000 bottles.

**Chateau Changyu Moser XV:** Changyu's formidable investment here has created one of China's best reds, the Grand Vin Chateau Changyu Moser XV, a blend of Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah); rich, generous and classic Bordeauxesque with a touch of China's spice. A 'second wine', Moser Family – a pure Cabernet Sauvignon 2010, is available in Europe at around €25.00 a bottle and worth it. The winery has 67 ha of mainly Cabernet Sauvignon vines of around 10 years old. Changyu also buys in around 5,000 ha worth of grapes for its general business, apart from the winery.

**Chateau Lilan Lancui:** Owner Shao Quingsong, a former fashion designer, fell in love with wine 10 years ago and started planning his chateau eight years ago. It was completed in 2014. When you meet Shao in person, you can immediately understand his young, fresh and witty (or spicy) wines, vineyards and chateau.

harvested last year. About 90% is red, with Cabernet Sauvignon dominating, with Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Gernischt as well. Syrah, Pinot Noir and Petit Verdot are planted on a smaller scale. As for whites, there is barely 100 ha of Chardonnay, with the rest being mostly Italian Riesling.

- Production of medium- to high-quality wine only, and education from both the New and Old Worlds.
- Using the vine burial as a unique selling point: In winter the temperature can drop a stiff 20°C below zero and suffer from a strong wind chill factor, hence the vineyards are covered in soil. This gives the vines a chance to rest for four months and creates a special character.
- The main goal: Best in China – famous in the world!

The government supports these plans in a number of ways, including by sending people overseas to learn and by creating the Ningxia Winemakers Challenge to bring in foreign winemakers. They have also set standards for vineyard planting, e.g. not ploughing too deeply because of frost, planting the vines at 45 degrees for easier burial, and going easy on fertilisers and pesticides, for quasi-sustainable farming.

One problem is high pricing – it's not rare to be confronted with wines ex-chateau that can cost 400RMB to 1,000RMB (\$60.00 to \$150.00) a bottle. The government is trying to introduce cost savings at all levels – for example, the use of mechanisation – in order to achieve better prices.

As Jancis Robinson MW said in 2012 on the occasion of her Ningxia visit: "The whole world will witness more and more surprises at the East Foothill of Helan Mountain." After visiting 30 wineries and tasting more than 150 wines from the region I can only agree with her prediction.



The vineyards of Ningxia



Austrian entrepreneur Lenz M. Moser

### Final thoughts

The speed of development and the amount of money being spent is mind-blowing – this could lead to Ningxia being a world-class region within five to ten years, depending on whether individual wineries can sustain their seriousness of purpose (and their spending). There is definitely the potential for top wines in Ningxia, with wineries such as Helan Mountain, Silver Heights, Jia Bei Lan, Chateau Changyu Moser XV and many more looking promising.

At present a lot of Bordeaux-esque wines are being produced, but the unique terroir offer sensational prospects for a new wine experience and a true Ningxia style. However, international benchmarking is needed to bring prices in line with global markets and to help develop that unique style. What's very interesting to observe is how important women are here, at every level, from winemaking to the board room.

As for the future? Everybody stay tuned! I have never experienced something so special in my entire life: the boundless dedication from the government, plus the ambitious individual wineries, and the biggest potential domestic market in the world, will create further miracles. The spirit really reminds me of the excitement of the early Napa Valley days. This is just the beginning, yet it will happen very quickly – it's bud break in Ningxia right now! ■



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