

WATERS ON WINE

## The first real taste of Chinese wine shows tremendous potential

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An LCBO release of four wines from Chateau Changyu Moser XV, a boutique winery operating in the foothills of the Helan Mountain in Ningxia in northern China, is one of the first real glimpses of that country's wine boom.

Chinese wine has long been touted as one to watch, but the industry has been so cloaked in mystery it's never been quite clear what to expect. An LCBO release of four wines from Chateau Changyu Moser XV, a boutique winery operating in the foothills of the Helan Mountain in Ningxia in northern China, is one of the first real glimpses of that county's fine wine boom.

Ningxia (pronounced Ning-shah) province represents 10 per cent of the total wine production in China, but its focus on quality has many experts banking it is the region that will put Chinese wine on the map. Parallels have been drawn to the Napa Valley, which only makes 4 per cent of California's wine, yet is widely viewed as the Golden State's very best.

One of those experts, Austria vintner Lenz M. Moser sold his shares in the family wine business to focus his efforts on forging a fine-wine scene in China. After 10 years working with a winery in Shandong province, Moser was named chief winemaker of Chateau Changyu Moser XV in 2015. "It's a once in a lifetime opportunity to build something from zero," Moser says. "A very lucky chance. One that it's crucial not to mess up."

The 15th generation of an Austria wine dynasty who worked alongside Robert Mondavi as the general manager of European sales for Mondavi's wine interests for nine years, Moser is uniquely suited to his present occupation. Along with serving as chief winemaker, he is also chief marketer and chief strategist for the Ningxia operation, the crown jewel for the Changyu Pioneer Wine company, which was

founded in 1892 and remains one of China's oldest and largest commercial wineries. It's also one of the biggest wine companies in the world.



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Moser took charge of the 250 hectare Ningxia property in 2015 and set out to make high-standard wine. He points to the natural conditions, a semi-arid desert climate moderated by its high elevation that helps to preserve acidity in the grapes, which result in grapes clusters with small berries and thick skins that are ideal for making top-quality cabernet sauvignon. "As a winemaker, I've said I'm always looking for the perfect grape," Moser says. "I've found that here."

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"We want to make the best wine of China, and we need also to make wines belonging in the company of the world's finest," he says. The Helan Mountain subregion of Ningxia has always been seen one of China's prime growing regions. In 2003, it was recognized as China's first official wine appellation by the country's government. The first vines were planted in 1982, with the first winery opening in 1985.

The wine industry has fuelled the economic development of the region, with strong government support for training and infrastructure development, including road and power utilities construction to encourage more growth. The success of Ningxia's wines at Chinese and international wine competitions has attracted investments from the likes of Pernod-Ricard and LVMH.

Everything isn't perfect, mind you. Hot in summer and freezing in winter, the region's frigid conditions mean the vines need to be buried under soil from November to April to shelter them from the elements. It's a costly practice that's hard on the vines. An estimated 5 per cent are lost each year and the likelihood of older vines cracking as they are bent down for burial increases. There seems to be little chance Ningxia wineries will be able to market any wines produced from old vines in the future.

As for the quality of wines coming out of the region, they are a marked improvement over early releases from Chinese producers. The rare few Chinese wines available to Canadian consumers 15 years ago were poorly made, thin red

wines with underripe vegetal flavours as opposed to any discernable fruit.

The best thing they had going for them was curiosity. More recently, we've seen a few flagship wines, such as the \$400-plus a bottle Ao Yun Cabernet Sauvignon. These sporadic releases never provide an opportunity to compare with other wines to truly get a sense of things.

The Chateau Changyu Moser XV release through the LCBO gives a meaningful look at the portfolio, with a rosé and three cabernet sauvignon-based wines ranging in price from \$23 to \$135 a bottle. They're a promising sign that quality wines are coming out of China that are interesting and enjoyable, not merely novelty items.

The two most affordable wines from Chateau Changyu Moser XV are reviewed this week alongside two value-priced reds that are ideal winter weather selections.

### **Chateau Changyu Moser XV Cabernet Sauvignon Blanc de Noir 2018 (China)**

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RATING OUT OF 100 **88**

PRICE: \$25.20

Made from 100-per-cent cabernet sauvignon, this is a mouth-filling and flavourful rosé that's nicely balanced. The price makes it a splurge, but there's a wow factor here. The pleasant mix of fruit flavours makes it easy to appreciate. Drink now. Available in Ontario.

### **Chateau Changyu Moser XV Helan Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 (China)**

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RATING OUT OF 100 **88**

PRICE: \$22.95

For anyone looking to get a taste of cabernet sauvignon grown in the semi-arid conditions of northern China, this is as unvarnished as it comes. Made from 100-per-cent cabernet sauvignon juice that's fermented and aged in stainless steel, without any oak impact whatsoever, this shows attractive fruit and spice notes. The texture is smooth and appealing. Drink now to 2023. Available in Ontario.

### **La Casona de Castaño Old Vines Monastrell 2017 (Spain)**

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RATING OUT OF 100 **88**

PRICE: \$10.49

This always packs a lot of robust flavour and complexity for the price. An old vines monastrell from a family-owned winery in Yecla, this richly concentrated red offers a heady mix of baked dark fruit, espresso and pepper. Drink now. Available at the above price in British Columbia, various prices in Alberta.

### **Honoro Vera Garnacha 2017 (Spain)**

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RATING OUT OF 100 **88**

PRICE: \$13.70

Coming from 30- to 40-year-old garnacha vines in the Calatayud region of northern Spain, this ripe and juicy red wine offers a core of sweet blueberry and red fruit jam with some spice and earthy flavours. It's ripe, flavourful and ready to drink. Available at the above price in Ontario, \$21.90 in British Columbia, various prices in Alberta, \$13.45 in Quebec.

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