

The New Icons

No longer does a reference to Chinese wine mean Maotai or ‘that Great Wall stuff’—the country’s industry is now a force to be reckoned with

By Sarah Heller MW

The decade and a half since I joined the wine industry has been fascinating for Chinese wine. China’s vineyard land grew until it (briefly) outstripped that of France; a Chinese wine won a trophy in a major global wine competition, and reactions to the term “Chinese wine” went from “That Great Wall stuff?” or “You mean Maotai?” to “Grace Vineyards, Ao Yun or Long Dai?” Few could have foreseen in 2008 that today we would be in a position to speak in all earnestness about Chinese “icon” wines.

For context, this sort of meteoric rise took over a century in the United States, the only producer (and market) that provides a reasonable comparison. Though China also opened its first major winery in the 1800s (Changyu, established in 1892), its wine industry was essentially dormant for a century thereafter. It was really the proliferation of two business models—the foreign luxury firm’s highly capitalised, long-term investment and the (sometimes equally well-funded) family-owned boutique—that drove China’s wine quality boom after the turn of the millennium. Excitingly, while Ningxia’s famed Helan Mountain subregion—an arid, luminous spot on the edge of the Gobi Desert irrigated by the Yellow River—has become the epicentre of Chinese luxury wine, there are also ambitious wineries from Xinjiang to Shandong and Inner Mongolia to Yunnan.

Two years ago, when I last wrote about Chinese wines for *Tatler*, I deliberately showcased the diversity of both regions and grapes. This time, the wines are still from across the nation but are more stylistically homogenous—all but one (a white) are cabernet or blends, sometimes featuring China’s new viticultural darling, marselan, for spice, or even syrah for an edifying perfume; I have indicated the blends where relevant. I also included several different producers from last time; it is a testament to the abundance of quality-focused Chinese wineries that I had no trouble filling the list with mostly new names—the only repeats are Ao Yun and Grace Vineyard.

It is worth remembering that most of these are very young wines designed for long ageing. I didn’t find them overly austere, but in some cases new oak is quite apparent, especially in the more powerful wines. Vintage variation is also substantial. In many cases, the winemaking teams are still working out the subtleties of farming their sites and managing diverse weather conditions. For example, Long Dai’s current release (2019) was from a hot, dry year and thus potentially not quite representative of the style going forward. In my view, this is all part of the emergence of a new quality wine industry, and I for one am excited to see what lies ahead.





Shangri-La, home to Ao Yun winery

AO YUN, YUNNAN PROVINCE

Having cemented its cult status this year by being the first Chinese wine traded on exclusive wine distribution network La Place de Bordeaux, Ao Yun had already become a byword for Chinese luxury wine. The “wine from Shangri-La” would always have had a leg up from a storytelling perspective, but its unique location, some 2,500m above sea level in a Himalayan mountain valley, is more than just a marketing feature: it lends the wines intense colour and aroma but also a delicacy and lift that stand in stark contrast to the more robust wines of Ningxia.

This year marks the mainland Chinese release of two new projects hinted at in my last discussion with estate director, Maxence Dulou: single-village wines made from the individual components of the Ao Yun blend (Xidang, Adong, Shuori and Sinong, the last of which was not bottled separately in 2018); and the winery’s first white, a chardonnay from Adong village, which is the highest site at 2,600m. Ao Yun itself includes merlot for the

first time and is now being partially aged in Chinese earthenware jars to keep new oak notes in check.

ADONG

CHARDONNAY 2018
Sumptuous tangerine and lime blossom cool to unripe nectarine with a wash of barley sugar and toast to round out the finish. The texture is pleasantly oily.

XIDANG 2018

This site has the warmest soils and air, but even so, the wine has a core of acidity and porcelain tannins. The exterior is rich with sweet cherry, red plum, cloves and black chocolate.

Blend: 63% cabernet sauvignon, 17% cabernet franc, 20% petit verdot

ADONG 2018

The most upright and nervous of the three, Adong is assertively floral to start, with a tight, acidic, almost saline palate and peppery, brambly fruit.

Blend: 78% cabernet sauvignon, 14% syrah, 8% cabernet franc

SHUORI 2018

Already planted in 2000, Shuori village is furthest from the cooling Mekong,

It has a plump, amiable bearing with bouncy purple fruit that darkens into dried fig on the finish. Cedary aromas and satiny texture keep the overall effect refined.

Blend: 75% cabernet sauvignon, 25% cabernet franc

AO YUN 2018

A return to form after the burlier, darker expression of 2017, 2018 is precise but lyrical, a reflection of the generally mild growing season and warm, generous harvest. A hint of menthol and leafy greens opens into a lucid, tart cherry wave rounded out with coffee and savoury herbs. Fluid texture and pliant tannins complete the elegant picture.

Blend: 60% cabernet sauvignon, 19% cabernet franc, 10% merlot, 7% syrah, 4% petit verdot

CHATEAU CHANGYU MOSER XV, NINGXIA

I chatted at length with 15th-generation Austrian wine scion (hence “XV”) Laurenz “Lenz” Moser about his joint venture with mega-winery Changyu. He first went to China in 2005 and fell in love with

the country. The initial deal involved his marketing and selling Changyu’s existing wines but ten years in, they mutually decided Moser would instead be chief winemaker of Chateau Changyu Moser, which opened its grandiose, Bordelais-style doors in Ningxia’s Helan Mountain region in 2013. The focus is cabernet sauvignon—the reds are 100%—with even blanc de noir made from the grape.

Bringing his familiarity with international consumers and insights from pre-harvest visits to 35 other Ningxia wineries, Moser was able to blend wines he felt truly expressed the region’s quality potential. They are now exported to 40 countries. Going forward, Moser sees most quality gains coming from the vineyards, which have been left patchy by annual vine burial and inexperienced workers. Beyond China, he says, “our ultimate goal and purpose is to belong in the company of the world’s finest”.

MOSER FAMILY RED WINE 2017

A generous lashing of black chocolate and dense plummy fruit gives way to a nutmeg and vanilla close. Dense layers are freshened by a dash of bitterness on the finish.

CHATEAU CHANGYU MOSER XV GRAND VIN 2017

Scorched cacao and burnt sage overlay blackberries that shade into blueberries. The fruit is solid and persistent, supported by polished, Napa-like tannins.



IMAGE: J. PENNICK (FIELD)

PURPLE AIR COMES FROM THE EAST 2016

A real contrast with the earlier wines, the poetically named Purple Air (a Daoist phrase that portends the coming of auspicious people or events) brings exactly that: liting, ethereal notes of violets and potpourri. The palate is poised and serene, with gracile tannins, illuminating acidity and more moderate alcohol (14% vs 15% for the Grand Vin). Notes of cumin and cedar overlay medicinal red fruit with a tonic bitterness.

CHATEAU RONGZI, SHANXI PROVINCE

Though exported globally, outside China, Chateau Rongzi has largely been overshadowed by its fellow Shanxi winery Grace Vineyard, except when Rongzi’s esteemed Yellow Label appears on “most expensive” lists (at RMB3,000+ a bottle, it belongs there). In fact, before sourcing the wines for this article I had yet to taste Rongzi, which is named for an ancient Jin dynasty (266-420 AD) matriarch thought to be China’s first winemaker.

I could not have been more pleasantly surprised by both the quality and style, which is the quintessence of polish. A mere 13% ABV, this is a wine that sashays rather than plods. Remembering that the head winemaker is Jean-Claude Berrouet, veteran of 44 vintages of Pétus, it all makes sense. Unlike the merlot-based Pétus, Rongzi is cabernet sauvignon-based, and

farmed between 950 and 1,300m above sea level on the Loess Plateau. Berrouet doubtless has ample resources to work his magic, given the winery was famously founded with an initial investment of RMB1.3 billion in 2008.

PATRICIAN LOTUS 2018

This wine is one I was unable to even locate online but was sent to me by the winery to taste. Like the Yellow Label, it delivers a panoply of flavours and sensations: celery leaf and a whisper of red chilli about lush black cherry and blood orange, leaving a moist earth, cacao, cigar box and black truffle trail. Satiny tannins and fine-boned acidity step up a beat after the fruit has washed away. **Blend: 68.4% cabernet sauvignon, 16.4% cabernet franc, 15.1% marselan, 0.1% merlot**



ELEGANT YELLOW LABEL 2013

As well as the qualities alluded to earlier, Yellow Label boasts an endlessly fascinating nose of red paprika, graphite, verbena and pepper shading into red cherry, cassis and nutmeg. The charmeuse of the mid-palate billows outward before coming to fine, harmonious close. **Blend: 81.5% cabernet sauvignon, 12.2% merlot, 4.3% cabernet franc**

GRACE VINEYARDS, SHANXI PROVINCE

In Hong Kong wine circles, Grace Vineyards and its proprietors Judy Chan and her father CK Chan need no introduction, having bought their Shanxi vineyard in 1997 with the support of French wine scholar and “Apostle of Cabernet Sauvignon” Dr Denis Boubals. Famously, Judy took control of the company in 2002 at the age of 24, leading it through its 2018 listing on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange and ramping up production to several



million bottles a year.

Chairman's Reserve is a tribute to the family patriarch. Decades ago, CK Chan ran a coal-mining business in Shanxi; part of his decision to locate the vineyard there, despite concerns about air pollution, was a deep sense of responsibility towards the local environment, as well as the discovery that its well-drained soils mimic those of Bordeaux.

GRACE VINEYARDS CHAIRMAN'S RESERVE 2018

Very dark and plump-fruited, showing blackberry and cassis with nuances of cacao, mushroom, incense, citronella and cedar. Fresh acidity and clicking tannins gradually spread, leaving a velvety swaddle over the palate.

Blend: 82% cabernet sauvignon, 15% merlot, 3% cabernet franc

HELAN QINGXUE, NINGXIA

The name "Jia Bei Lan" has been lionised since the 2009 vintage of this pure cabernet won the Decanter World Wine Awards International Trophy in 2011, leaving the wine world vibrating with excitement and—in some quarters—nerves. Would China soon rival Bordeaux and Napa, flooding the world with inexpensive cabernet? Of course no such thing happened; top Chinese wines are principally enjoyed domestically and are rapidly becoming as expensive as any Pomerol or Napa cult wine. The quality, though, is unmistakable.

Helan Qingxue vineyard,

named for the famous snowy vistas, was the first "demonstration vineyard" to be planted in Ningxia, in 2005. Its name is less familiar outside China than the name of its Grand Reserve Jia Bei Lan.

JIA BEI LAN GRAND RESERVE 2015

Nose begins quite quiet, with umami soy, cinnamon and star anise. Palate has a liquor cherry and black chocolate prettiness cut by bitter herb jelly. Gossamer tannins complement a fine patina of acidity.

JIA BEI LAN GRAND RESERVE 2016

Tar and liquorice lend angles to this much more curvaceous, black cherry and blackberry iteration of Jia Bei Lan. Tannin and fruit both reach a crescendo on the mid-palate before ceding the floor to a peal of acidity.

JIA BEI LAN GRAND RESERVE 2017

Currently the most open of the three, with a baking-spice sweetness and ripe plum nose. The palate is filled with light, both of gem-like cassis fruit and glinting acidity. A cathedral arch of tactile tannins is beautifully distributed across the front and back palate.

DOMAINE DE LONG DAI, SHANDONG PROVINCE

Long Dai must be one of the most anticipated wine releases of recent years—I can remember discussing the as-yet unnamed Domaines Barons de Rothschild (DBR) project



with then president and CEO Christophe Salin in 2016, a year before the inaugural 2017 vintage was produced. The company put down roots in China in 2008, when no consensus had yet formed around the country's flagship region; they chose Penglai, a subregion of Yantai in Shandong where China's wine industry was born.

Lying a mere 30km from the coast, its climate is more similar to Bordeaux than the famous regions further inland; it is milder (no need for vine burial) but also suffers July and August monsoons, something DBR has had to research extensively to mitigate. Speaking to general manager Charles Treutenaere and his local team, it is clear everything has been done to maximise quality, including terracing vineyards for drainage and importing barrels from its Lafite cooperage and its vines from France, a



Barrels of Domaine de Long Dai wine

complicated and costly process that sets the winery apart in China. Today more wineries are opening in Long Dai's neighbourhood, but it remains by far the most prestigious.

HU YUE 2019

This is the debut year for Hu Yue, designed to be approachable in youth. The name contains a reference to jade and a mountain (like Long Dai) but also a tiger, which appears on the label (Saskia de Rothschild's idea). It has less cabernet sauvignon than Long Dai, but many other components come from the same source; grapes for the two are not selected until after fermentation. The first nose delivers an intense blast of cassis, with violets filling the margins; the back is blacker and richer, with savouriness and an edge of bitter herb jelly. *Blend: 57% cabernet sauvignon, 17% marselan, 15% syrah, 11% cabernet franc*

LONG DAI 2019

"Long Dai" references the dragon, jade and "an idealised mountain that rose through the power of nature and was then carefully chiselled by

human hands". The name feels apt, with an initial brooding smokiness and impenetrability that gradually loosen and refocus into a more polished, sculpted shape. Its fruit is dense and figgy but never quite melts into lusciousness.

Blend: an undisclosed blend of cabernet sauvignon (high percentage), marselan and cabernet franc



SILVER HEIGHTS, NINGXIA

Of the numerous father-daughter pairs that have established wineries in Ningxia, native of the region Gao Lin and his daughter Emma Gao Yuan are the OGs, having founded their boutique winery in 2007. Emma trained in Bordeaux and honed her winemaking skills at the renowned Château Calon-Ségur before returning to China in 2005 with her husband Thierry Courtade (of Calon-Ségur) and their daughter Emma. "Little Emma" heads to university this year to study oenology in preparation for her future role as third-generation owner of Silver Heights.

The wines have been farmed organically from the beginning. A 2012 purchase of 70 hectares has allowed the winery to estate grow all its production since 2015 and now it has converted to biodynamics. Their low-sulphur Jiayuan range and experimental sparkling pet-nats of skin-fermented white grapes and rice are Gen-Z-ready, but in export markets Silver Heights is most known for its Bordeaux-style fine

wines: The Summit and Emma's Reserve.

THE SUMMIT 2018

Nose starts off with tea roses, cedar and dried herbs but the palate is rich, toothsome and structured with dark plums and a meaty, umami glaze. A luscious texture yields to a warming finish.

Blend: 92% cabernet sauvignon, 8% petit verdot

EMMA'S RESERVE 2017

This spends one year more in French oak (100% new here) than The Summit, marking the ambition of the cuvée; an opulent floral and amber nose is brightened with pine and green cardamom; the palate is concentrated and fruit-packed, with cacao nib, cassis and black cherry shading into a fragrant sandalwood finish.

Blend: 50% cabernet sauvignon, 50% merlot



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