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The World Atlas of
WINE
8TH EDITION

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China

In a fast-changing world of wine, no country has evolved as rapidly and dramatically as China. Grape wine was virtually unknown in China in the 1980s but today the famously numerous Chinese constitute the world's fifth most-important consumers of wine.

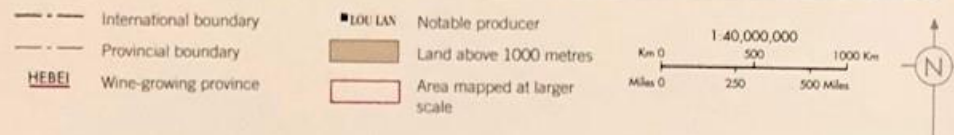
So efficiently have vines been going into the ground that between 2006 and 2016 China more than doubled its total vineyard area to over 2 million acres (847,000ha) – more than any country other than Spain. However, the vast majority of vines, as much as 90% according to some estimates, is devoted to table grapes with some for drying into raisins.

Among those who can afford it, including a burgeoning urban middle class, wine has been one of the most potent signifiers of the westernization of China. Average wine consumption in the Chinese population may be only 2.1 US pints (1.4 litres a year) but, until the economic slowdown of the late 2010s, it rose at such a rate – almost 10% a year – that Shanghai and Beijing became even more popular destinations for wine exporters than New York and London. The first wave of hopefuls came from Bordeaux. Red Bordeaux, or wines purporting to be red Bordeaux (fakes were rife), dominated wine sales in China in the 2000s. But Chinese wine drinkers are very much more knowledgeable (wine courses abound) and experimental today. Burgundy mania replaced Bordeaux mania but, thanks to cunning free trade agreements, Australia and Chile dominate the mass market.

Until capital controls were imposed, many Chinese entrepreneurs invested in Bordeaux *petits châteaux* – over 100 of them. China supplies the biggest cohort of wine students at Bordeaux University other than the French. The Chinese are also major investors in the Australian wine industry.

Ancient origins

The vine was known to gardeners in far western China at least as early as the 2nd century AD when wine, very possibly grape wine, was certainly made and consumed. European grape varieties were introduced to eastern China at the end of the 19th century, but it was only in the late 20th century that grape-based wine insinuated itself into Chinese (urban) society.



HEBEI AND SHANDONG

The modern era of Chinese wine began here. There are now dozens of wineries, including those owned by such giants as Changyu and the government-owned COFCO, as well as wine factories around Yantai processing vast amounts of imported bulk wine.



China's love affair with grape wine – *putaojiu* as opposed to mere *jiu*, meaning any alcoholic drink – was encouraged by the state, partly in an effort to reduce cereal imports. According to the most recent OIV figures, China has been the world's sixth most-important wine producer since the turn of the century, making 1.14 billion litres of wine in 2016. But independently verified Chinese statistics are hard to come by, and Chinese wine bottlers have notoriously bumped up production with imported wine, grape must, grape concentrate, and even liquids completely unrelated to grapes. Things are changing, however, as an increasing proportion of consumers know what wine ought to taste like. The days of soda being added to fine wine to make it palatable are long gone.

In the early years of this century, it was difficult to find wines labelled as Chinese of any real quality. So fashionable was anything presented to Chinese consumers as a fair copy of red Bordeaux that there was little incentive to try very hard. (For linguistic and cultural reasons, the average Chinese consumer has strongly favoured still red wine; very little wine sold in China sparkles). Until President Xi's crackdown in 2012, wine was a popular "gift" in business circles, which encouraged many producers to put more effort and money in the packaging than the liquid.

In the vineyard, thanks to early Bordeaux influence, Cabernet Sauvignon, and to a lesser extent Merlot and Cabernet Gernischt (Carmenère), dominated and still dominate plantings, but in the early days, wines were typically underripe and over-oaked. By about 2010, however, an elite of carefully made, truly Chinese-grown wines began to emerge and continues to expand. Marselan, the modern crossing of Cabernet and Grenache, has achieved a quality deserving a following, and the varietal range is slowly broadening, with the thick-skinned Petit Manseng valued for sweet whites. Long-yan, a table grape, is vinified, even valued, by some producers and results in a light, inconsequential white. Italian Riesling and Chardonnay are widely planted.

Extreme weather

China's vastness offers an infinite range of soils, altitudes, and latitudes. Climate is more of a problem. Inland China suffers continental extremes so most vines have to be banked up painstakingly every autumn to protect them from fatally freezing temperatures. This adds considerably to production costs, not least because a certain proportion of vines are lost each year from being manhandled, but is currently just about affordable. The continued movement of the Chinese from countryside

Chateau Changyu Moser XV is typical of the grandiose buildings erected as part of ambitious wine estates in China. In this joint venture the Moser is Austrian winemaker Lenz Moser.

to cities, however, means that mechanization of this laborious operation is increasing. The earlier vines can be uncovered, the less likely they will have sprouted vulnerable buds. The Chinese soils that are so painstakingly shovelled onto the vines every November and unbanked every spring are generally dangerously low in acidity.

Meanwhile, much of the coast, especially in southern and central areas, is subject to monsoonal rains in July and early August after very dry winters and springs. With a maritime climate that requires no winter protection of vines, **Shandong** offers well-drained, south-facing slopes. The first wineries and vineyards of the modern era were established there.

This is where about a quarter of China's hundreds of wineries are now based, but fungal diseases are a threat most summers. Average yields are as high as 135hl/ha here, much higher than in the drier inland wine regions. Changyu was the pioneer, founding a winery here as early as 1892, and is still by far the dominant producer.

Ambitious wine tourism projects are the norm. When, in 2009, the owner of Château

Lafite decided to establish a serious winery in China, rather to the surprise of industry observers, it chose a hilly site in Penglai that has since been surrounded by other enterprises designed to lure wine tourists. Lafite's first wine, mainly Cabernet, was released in 2019.

Further inland, **Hebei** province is second only to Shandong in terms of wine output (though it can be difficult to track the origin of everything bottled there). It has the advantage of being even closer to Beijing, and on the tourist trail to the Great Wall. With less rainfall than Shandong but more than Ningxia, it benefits from a fairly long growing season for vines that have to be buried during the worst months of winter. Some particularly ambitious wine "chateaus" cluster around Huailai.

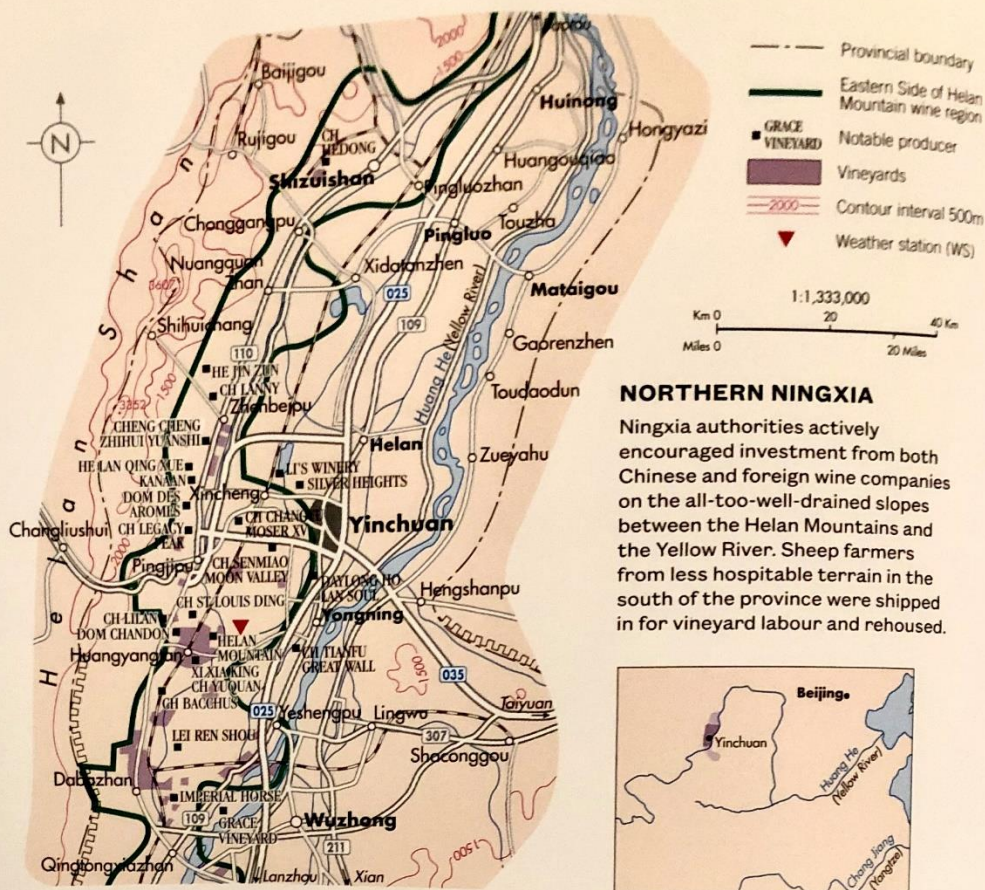
The far northeast of China, **Dongbei** (Inner Manchuria) has proved suitable for icewine production, from Vidal, Riesling, and some dark-skinned hybrids of the local vine family, *Vitis amurensis*, such as the Beibinghong grape.

Grace Vineyard was established in **Shanxi** province in 1997 by a family based in Hong Kong. By 2004, it was producing some of the best wines in China, including a sparkling wine and China's first Aglianico, on an estate in Taigu on loess-dominated soils. Monsoons can reach as far inland as here but temperatures are generally moderate. The Grace team has, like many others, been exploring other provinces further west.

Gansu, whose Hexi Corridor has one of China's oldest viticultural traditions, has also attracted foreign investment – in this case from Mihalis Boutaris from Greece, who has been making a creditable Pinot Noir at his Xigu Moen estate in Tianshui. Mogao, the largest winery in this area, began life as a medical opioid producer but diversified into wine – of variable quality. Soils can be rather heavy in Gansu, while a lack of both labour and warmth has dogged some **Shaanxi** trials.

Between Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Gansu is **Ningxia**, the most wine-minded province of all. Ningxia's local government was determined to make its reclaimed land – at around 3,300ft (1,000m) altitude on the gravelly east-facing banks of the Yellow River – China's most important wine province, although the likely effects of a recent regime change are as yet unknown. Irrigation from the river is vital because annual rainfall averages 9.8–11.8in (250–300mm), which, unfortunately, tends to fall in late summer. Vines are buried every autumn (see p.18). Vineyards, and wineries, now skirt the foot of the Helan mountain range, most of the best above the Yellow River's alluvial flats.

Pernod Ricard and LVMH (for Chandon sparkling wine production) were some of the first to be lured to set down roots here, and



both the tentacular giant, state-owned COFCO and Changyu, originally based in Shandong, have joined the many significant producers of all sizes in Ningxia. Smaller producers of note include Silver Heights, Kanaan, and Helan Qingxue, all of whom make some of China's best red Bordeaux blends.

The wild west

In extremely arid **Xinjiang** province in the far northwest, ingenious irrigation systems harness meltwater from some of the highest mountains in the world. But the growing season is short – sometimes too short for wine grapes to ripen properly – and the vineyards are thousands of miles from most consumers.

The Tien Shan (Heaven Mountain) range divides the massive region into northern and southern parts, with the Turpan-Hami Basin to the east. Annual rainfall is as low as 2.8–3.1in (70–80mm) and there can be massive temperature differences between day and night.

When LVMH sent Australian wine consultant Dr Tony Jordan to find the perfect place for red wine production in China, he eventually settled, after four years' research, on a clutch of tiny mountain villages on the Tibetan border in **Yunnan**, in the upper valleys (at almost 9,800ft/3,000m) of the Mekong and Yangtze rivers, where French missionaries had planted vines much earlier. Winters are warm enough to obviate the need to bury vines, and monsoons do not reach this far inland. The resulting wine,

NINGXIA: YINCHUAN

Latitude / Elevation of WS
WS 38.28° / 339ft (1,111m)

Average growing season temperature at WS
63.9°F (17.7°C)

Average annual rainfall at WS
7.2in (183mm)

Harvest month rainfall at WS
October: 0.96in (24.5mm)

Principal viticultural hazards
Drought, winter freeze

Principal grape varieties
R: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Gernischt (Carmenère), Marselan; W: Italian Riesling, Chardonnay

Ao Yun, is not underpriced but confirms his choice. Other wine producers have followed his lead.

All in all, things have evolved enormously since the 1970s when the Chinese drank beer and spirits. Taking advantage of this change in drinking habits, the Hong Kong government craftily reduced duty on wine to zero in 2008. (Duties are still punitive over the order in mainland China.) Since then Hong Kong has become Asia's fine wine hub, not just where well-heeled Chinese buy their wine, but where huge quantities of the world's finest bottles are uncorked. The world's fine wine trade buzzes around this honeypot like no other.