

Lenz Moser, chief winemaker, Chateau Changyu Moser XV

Lenz Moser has gone from making Grüner Veltliner in Austria to producing white Cabernet Sauvignon in China's Ningxia region for Changyu Pioneer Company. He told **Jo Gilbert** how he plans to take his wine from the 'Napa of Asia' to the rest of the world

Following the opening of Chateau Changyu Moser XV in 2013, the first red Cabernet Sauvignons from 2015 are now available in Tesco and Berry Bros & Rudd. So, why Ningxia?

Changyu invested €70 million in the construction of the chateau, giving me the tools to make the best wine in China. My top choice for a location was Ningxia, where the conditions are somewhat extreme – the region receives more than 3,000 sunshine hours a year (more than Bordeaux), yet temperatures get so cold in winter we have to bury the vines in the ground until the spring. But I like acidity in my wines, and that remains if the nights are cool. Also, Ningxia has the best Cabernet Sauvignon berries I've seen in my life. Heaven.

What has been your input as a western winemaker coming to make wine in China?

The Chinese are trying to do two things: make wine and educate people about wine. The way they're doing that is by following the Bordeaux chateau style, including limiting production and yields, with a museum so they can show people what they're doing.

Part of my role with Changyu is also to pass on my knowledge to the group's winemakers, leading by example. I'm there for three months out of the year, including during harvest.

In 2015 I actually postponed harvest, which meant it fell over the Chinese Moon Festival at the beginning of October. I made the workers stay on – it's what had to be done.

What have you had to learn?

In somewhere such as Germany, people tackle things head on, but the Chinese will go as far as possible to avoid dealing with a problem. There's not a word for 'no', because it's not polite. It's all about saving face, which makes things difficult because with problem solving you have to draw a line. I've done 48 trips now and what I've learned is that you have to be humble and listen. If you go in with a German or American approach, you will fail.



Image: Piers Cunliffe, Kinamen Photography

Persistence is very important. You have to prove yourself.

In 2016, you released a white Cabernet Sauvignon, which is China's first – albeit still – Blanc de Noir. How did that come about?

If life gives you lemons, make lemonade, and it was the same with Cabernet Sauvignon. Some years ago, the Chinese government started to promote red wine

as good for the nation's health, and it decided Cabernet Sauvignon was the best red grape, which is why 80% of the grapes in China are Cab. Around 10% of varietal wines are white, but there isn't enough for export, and besides, the quality isn't there yet. In the meantime, I'm focusing on teaching and seminars on how to make white Cabernet, but what I really want is to make a Ningxia style of wine. Ningxia is one of the youngest of China's wine regions – the first winery was only built around 20 years ago, but now it has 100 active wineries with 80 in construction and the current 32,000ha of vineyards is expected to double in the next five years.

It's quickly being recognised for its fine wines. Ningxia is going to be Napa of China.

You're currently exporting to the UK and Germany, with distribution via Bibendum in the UK. What is the future for Chinese wine globally?

In China, trust and persistence are important to build things from the ground up and that takes time. But things can also happen very quickly. You can expect the Chinese wine market to grow a lot over the next few years, and to improve quality. Give me five years – export is going to take off.

What's the opportunity for domestic sales?

China is just learning to enjoy the good life, and it has decided wine is a part of it. Forty years ago it was a poor country, but now its buying power is second only to the US. Having said that, China will always be a large importer. At the moment the country has a 50% domestic and 50% import split (30% bottled and 20% bulk) for wine and it's likely to stay that way.

Are you ever nostalgic about your Grüner Veltliner days?

From a strategic point of view, no. I saw Changyu and China as an opportunity to do something on a global scale – something that was different to just selling Grüner Veltliner to the rest of world. Everyone is doing that.