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Lenz Moser's big Chinese trial



LMM Projects is busy, busy, busy – not least with pitting its wine made at this 'chateau' in China against Ch Lafite.

Lenz Maria Moser, as he styles himself to distinguish himself from the vine-training system and the Austrian winery called Lenz Moser, once owned by his family, seems to be everywhere at the moment – much more energetically than the average 67-year-old.

He now has joint ventures with Markus Huber in his native Austria, with Mad Wine in Tokaj and with Pedro Ribeiro of Herdade do Rocim in Portugal (with lightweight 360-g bottles). But his first and most important joint venture is with China's oldest and biggest wine company, Changyu, where he is pictured below.

For 18 years now he has been working with their 'chateau' in Ningxia, particularly on wines to export, and he contacted me recently to suggest a tasting of their top wine, Ch Changyu Moser XV, Purple Air Comes from the East, with various top Cabernets. He explained this somewhat cumbersome name to me in an email: 'this was given to me by a Chinese calligrapher in Qingdao on the occasion of a speech I gave in 2015 - he liked it so much (for our vision of making wine in China and belonging in the company of the world's finest) that he wanted to give me something and did this piece of art on a poster about two metres wide. It means: all the good stuff comes across the East China Sea and purple is THE noble colour in China too.'

As I have taken a keen interest in developments in China since I first went there at the beginning of the century, I readily agreed, further encouraged by the wines he proposed to compare them with. The vintages changed slightly between what he initially suggested and what was delivered to my flat, those listed below, but you get the picture.

- Lafite 2019
- Figeac 2018
- Léoville Las Cases 2017
- Pontet-Canet 2017
- Opus One 2019
- Ao Yun 2016 (an early vintage of LVMH's Chinese adventure)
- Long Dai 2019 (a vintage of the Lafite Rothschilds' Chinese adventure that I had not yet tasted)

These were to be compared with the first two vintages released of Purple Air ..., also known as PACE, 2016 and 2019. I insisted, needless to say, on tasting all these wines blind. Blind tastings are all too rare, especially those comparing tried and tested classics with untested newcomers.

I was especially intrigued as I have visited both Ao Yun in Yunnan, close to the Tibetan border in the south of the country, and Long Dai in Shandong on the east coast. (Domaines Barons de Rothschild have since acquired the vineyards of their neighbour Treaty Port in the Qiu Shan Valley in Penglai district from Englishman Chris Ruffle.)

I had tasted the 2016 three times before, each time giving it a score of 16 or 16.5 but this time I was really impressed by it and scored it 17.5, thinking it might be Figeac 2018. When the identity of the wines was revealed it turned out that the one wine I thought was sub par was the 2019 vintage of PACE, 15% alcohol and blended by Moser in Austria on

the basis of samples couriered out of locked-down China.

One wine really stood head and shoulders above the rest and was clearly Lafite, so much more elegant than the rest and supremely well balanced.

In the end the only Chinese wine I did not pretty immediately identify as Chinese when tasting it blind was the 2016 PACE. Moser, who is convinced that the PACE 2019 will eventually turn into something as impressive as the 2016, claims that with this wine he wants to make 'a burgundian Cabernet Sauvignon, made for a wide range of Chinese foods'. He admits however that at this relatively early stage for fine Chinese wine, 'we are babies - there's a long way to go'.

We all know that there has been a dramatic downturn in the Chinese wine market. At its peak it comprised 18 million hl (476 million US gal) in total and is now down to 6 million hl according to OIV figures. Initially they exported 50% of the volume of PACE but that proportion fell to 20% after COVID-19. A major factor has been the Chinese trade war with Australia, which saw imports into China from a prime source of wine drop to virtually zero. 'That'll come back', Moser is convinced, 'but nothing like before.'

One bright spot for him in China is that although sales of sparkling wine in China are still low (even if Chandon in Ningxia is doing relatively well), interest in white wine is picking up a little. 'Chinese women don't want black teeth', he explained. He'll be exporting his New Chapter Grüner Veltliner, made with Markus Huber, to China before long.

Markus Huber (left) with Lenz Maria Moser

Since the tasting took place at home I was able to weigh all the full bottles, as I usually do. Here was yet more evidence that the most famous wines in the world do not use heavy bottles. Lafite 2019 came in the lightest bottle of all, even if the Lafite-owned Long Dai came in the heaviest bottle of all. That's the Chinese market for you, presumably.

More on this exceptional tasting - not least its cost - on Saturday.

The wines are presented below in the order Moser chose for me but you can change this.

Select sorting option ▼

I have added a note on their curiosity, a white wine made from Ningxia Cabernet Sauvignon.

The taste-off

Ao Yun 2016 Yunnan

Full bottle 1,574 g.

Tasted blind. Lustrous dense crimson with a little evolution at the rim. Quite delicate pencil shavings on the nose. Bone-dry finish and quite lifted. Lots of acidity. Lovely texture. Still youthful. Acidity dominates the palate but the finish is impressively long. Is this Lafite's Chinese Long Dai?

14.5%

Drink

2024

-

2030

16.5

Ch Léoville Las Cases 2017 St-Julien

Full bottle 1,339 g.

Tasted blind. Solid but not especially evolved purplish crimson. The densest colour in this blind tasting of top Cabernets and Chinese equivalents. Some ripe and interesting aromas can be coaxed out of this intense liquid. Strong Cabernet aromas. Not especially opulent. Just a little pinched on the end at the moment but this has a future! Las Cases?

13%

Drink

2026

-

2043

16.5 ++

Ch Changyu Moser XV, Purple Air Comes from the East 2016 Ningxia

Full bottle 1,308 g. Debut vintage, a very good one in Ningxia. Two years of 100% new oak. 12-year-old vines in a 4-ha vineyard next to the 'chateau'. All Cabernet Sauvignon; no Cabernet Gernicht (Carmenère).

Tasted blind. Very shaded with a ruby rim. Fresh, interesting, savoury notes of balsam on the nose. Thoroughly satisfying and layered with some really ripe Merlot apparently evident in the mix. Long and subtle. Light gaminess. Some evolution. Hedonistic. Could it be Figeac?

14%

Drink

2021

-

2029

17.5

Ch Pontet-Canet 2017 Pauillac

Full bottle 1,573 g.

Tasted blind. Crimson with some shading at the rim. Warm and very obviously ripe. Tightly reined-in with marked tannins. Quite sophisticated with savoury subtlety. Youthful. Definitely red bordeaux.

13%

Drink

2025

-

2036

17 +

Ch Lafite 2019 Pauillac

Full bottle 1,293 g - light!

Tasted blind. Paler than most with mid evolution. Very discreet aroma - hidden depths or subtlety? This could certainly be Lafite with its relatively light body and saline, dancing finish. Very elegant. Subtle. The epitome of raciness! Much the best wine in this blind line-up of top Cabs with top Chinese.

13%

Drink

2025

-

2042

18.5

Ch Figeac 2018 St-Émilion

Full bottle 1,342 g.

Tasted blind. Slightly dull crimson with a fading rim. Light tea-leaf aroma. Sweet and ripe and satisfying. Thick, dense. Lots going on here! Marked ripe tannins. Definitely a youthful bordeaux but with some sweetness - Figeac?

14.5%

Drink

2026

-

2045

17

Ch Changyu Moser XV, Purple Air Comes from the East 2019 Ningxia

Full bottle 1,594 g. They apparently sort the particularly tiny grapes (relative humidity is just 20% because this is desert) and ferment for two weeks max with classic pumpover and into barrel for two years. Bottled February 2023. Blended from samples sent to Lenz Moser in Austria because of the pandemic.

Tasted blind. Very glowing ruby rim and an intense crimson core. Rather cooked fruit – almost as though the wine were too hot. A bit simple and over the top without real mid-palate concentration. Rusty-nail finish that’s quite persistent. The least successful of these wines. Not that fresh – and probably over-extracted. Fully evolved. Rather rustic tannins. Big, rich and alcoholic. Surely this is Chinese?

15%

Drink

2021

-

2027

16

Opus One 2019 Napa Valley

Full bottle 1,426 g.

Tasted blind. Mid, slightly dull crimson with a fairly pale rim. Slightly simple Cabernet aromas with some oak traces left but then it opened up into a pretty smart wine with Cabernet in ascendant. There’s just a slight greenness on the not-especially-persistent, sweetish finish. I thought this might be Pontet Canet but would have guessed this was Opus if I’d read my previous tasting note about the strong cassis aromas.

13.5%

Drink

2025

-

2035

17

Long Dai 2019 Shandong

Full bottle 1,604 g. Denise Cosentino, an Italian ex Nine Peaks, is the current winemaker at this Lafite-owned winery, having taken over from Juliette Couderc, who is now at Ch L'Évangile in Pomerol.

Tasted blind. Some evolution in the colour here but no orange. Correct Cabernet nose without that much aromatic subtlety or intensity. There is certainly sweet density on the

palate – in fact the wine may be a little over-extracted. This is the most youthful wine in this blind comparison of top Chinese reds and other top Cabernets. Very ambitious! But quite sweet and thick. Could it be Purple Air 2019?

14.5%

Drink

2025

-

2035

16.5 +

A white oddity

Ch Changyu Moser XV, Blanc de Noir Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 Ningxia

Full bottle 1,449 g, A white wine made from Cabernet aged in new French barriques. This is the current vintage. They will switch to the 2021 in December 2023.

Quite rich initially and then tight and crisp on the end. Completely *sui generis*. Easy to like thanks to the light apparent sweetness. Pear-juice flavour. But it's not that long. A one-off!

14%

Drink

2021

-

2025

16