

THE SOMMELIER DIARIES  
Words Jean Smullen

# NINGXIA

WHERE EAST  
MEETS WEST

CHEF  
& Restaurant

Fullscreen





China has a growing number of wine regions, in the north west near the border with Russia and Mongolia are four wine regions, **Illu, Yanqui Basin, Manas Basin** and **Turpan** all in the Xinjiang province. Further east on the edge of the Mongolian desert is the **Helan Mountain Eastern Slope** in the province of Ningxia. On the outskirts of Beijing in the Hebei province there are two regions, **Huailai** and **Qinhuangdao**. In Shangdong, in eastern China, the first region to be planted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you will find the **Penglai** and **Yantai** wine regions. The Shanxi province, north west of Shandong has **Taigu** and **Xiangning**. Yunnan, in south east China is home to the

**Dequin** region and finally in the Liaoning province, a coastal region in eastern China you will find the **Huanren** wine region.

I travelled to the best known of China's wine regions Ningxia, to take part in the **Asian Wine, The Silk Route, 3<sup>rd</sup> Forum and Tasting** in the city of Yinchuan. The conference also included an exhibition of wines from all the regions in China as well as from 200 producers from over 20 countries worldwide. The forum included a series of wine seminars with lectures about wines from Ningxia, as well as visits to the wineries in the region. International wines also featured with Masterclasses from

Georgia and Armenia.

Two thousand years ago, the city of Yinchuan and the Ningxia region, was part of the Silk Road, along which goods and ideas travelled between China and Europe; silk went west and wool, gold, and silver came east. More recently, up until about twenty-five years ago, the area was a poverty-stricken coal mining region with dusty scrubland and a desert landscape. However, in 1995 the Chinese government began to invest in the region's infrastructure and began irrigating immense tracts of desert between the Yellow River and the Helan Mountains. The result of all this

investment is a youthful and vibrant emerging wine region, which centres around the small city of Yinchuan which today as a population of approximately 2 million people, tiny by Chinese standards.

The regions first winery was planted as far back as 1985, but it wasn't until the late 1990's following the state investment, that the region began to emerge as China's top wine region. European wine experts, hired by the government as consultants, had identified the Helan Mountain Eastern Slope region's continental climate as ideal for growing vines. However, the region's harsh, freezing winters,

would mean it had to operate on an eight-month season, as the wineries have to bury their vines to protect them from the cold. That aside, in less than 20 years, this relatively small area has emerged to become one of China's premium wine regions. Today the region had 540,000 mu under vine and now accounts for a fourth of China's total production, there are now 86 wineries with an annual production of 120 million bottles.

The region also has its own quality focussed classification system, authorised by Helan Mountain East and the International Wine Association, this system evaluates wineries

based on production, and quality, the wines were judged by an international jury in a blind tasting. The classification loosely resembles Bordeaux's 1855 Classification system in that it uses a tier system to define the quality status, based on 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> etc growths.

Ningxia is also one of the first regions in China to have a designated wine authority and is fast becoming THE destination in China for wine tourism. A "wine route" similar to Bordeaux's Route des Vins, now exists and many of the wineries welcome guests including **Chateau Changyu Moser XV, COFCO Great Wall Tianfu Winery, Zhihui Yuanshi Winery,**





**Ningxia Kanaan Winery, Château Lansai** and **Domaine Chandon Ningxia**, among many others, all of whom, have facilities to welcome visitors who wish to taste and buy wine.

The Ningxia region and the city of Yinchuan was also the destination for the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the **2019 Belt & Road International Wine Competition**. The competition was held in Yinchuan as part of their annual wine expo, which has a strong focus on Asian wine and is organised by the Government

of Yinchuan, in association with the Ningxia Vine & Wine Industry in collaboration with Concours Mondial de Bruxelles and the Beijing International Wine & Spirit Exchange. For the 2019 competition, 915 wines were entered. 458 of those were international wines and 457 came from China. Sixty wine experts from 24 countries took part in the tasting competition.

We also visited a number of wineries around the east foothills of the Helan Mountains two

stood out, both are very different but they have a strong European influence and good visibility on the export market. **Chateau Changyu Moser XV** and **Ningxia Kanaan Winery** couldn't be more different in terms of scale and size but both are unique and certainly represent what the region is capable of in terms of quality wine production.

**Chateau Changyu Moser XV** which opened in 2013 and cost 70 million dollars to build is a joint venture between the long-established

Government funded winery Changyu and one of Austria's leading winemakers Lenz Moser. The impressive Chateau style building is located in Yinchuan and the day we visited Lenz Moser had just flown in from Europe to work on the 2019 harvest.

Lenz Moser is the fifteenth generation of his family to make wine, the family winery was founded in Austria in 1892 but was sold in the 1980's to a multinational company. As part of the deal Moser stayed on to oversee the

winemaking and before he knew it 15 years had passed. Needing a change, he went on to run Robert Mondavi's European operation for eight years, before setting up LaurenZ his own Austrian winery, with two business partners. At that time, 15 years ago he was world renowned as a white winemaker and was known as Mr. Gruner Veltliner.

In 2010 following a trip to China to sell Austrian wine, he fell in love with the place and before he knew it, was working in partnership with

Chateau Changyu. He does not own any of the business but rather works with them as their winemaker. 2019 is his fifth vintage with Changyu who have 80,000 mu of vineyards in Yinchuan. Production is predominantly red wine made from a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Gernischt (Carmenere), Syrah and Merlot.

Moser told us that everything in the region is ideal for the production of good quality red grapes. He thinks this is due to a number





of factors, the continental climate, the high altitude which results in cooler nights, the region is 1,100 metres above sea level. The region is also very dry and as a result they get smaller berries which mature well. He feels that once you get those good quality mature berries, you get good wine.

My first tasting of a Lenz Moser wine took place in Dublin 24 years earlier. In 1995 at an Austrian wine event, I met Lenz Moser the fourteenth, who invited me to sample a white Cabernet Sauvignon his son had made. Now this was a very rare wine and there was only one vintage of it. The wine came about by accident, it was a very wet vintage and at the end of it the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes were covered

in botrytis and the skins were totally rotten and had virtually no colour. Moser decided that rather than let the juice go to waste he would vinify it as a white wine and that year produced 100,000 bottles of white Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine was released and it all sold out. It was sheer coincidence that I happened upon the wine and in conversation he was delighted that I remembered it.

Fast-forward 20 years and here in China where white wine is not really main-stream, Moser decided *"I'm Austrian I need a white wine"*, so he decided to de-juice directly from the crusher some of those ripe Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, and the result was a superb white wine with a lovely fresh acidity. The wine has not

only become a success in China, but its export sales are pretty healthy too. Approximately 10% of the wineries production is exported to 35 countries and key markets in Europe include Germany and the UK. He produces 200,000 bottles of the white cabernet and sells 120 bottles of it a month in London's top restaurants including Hedonism and Sexy Fish. In China too the wine has become extremely popular and has really helped to put Chateau Changyu Moser on the map.

For his reds, Moser like mature fine wines, he doesn't like herbaceous red wines, preferring a fruit expression. He learnt his red wine making skills from Robert Mondavi, who trained him directly and his benchmark is St Estephe. He has an ultra premium wine from his Chinese

estate, up his sleeve and looking to a launch it in 2020, so watch this space. In an article in the Financial Times in July 2019 Chateau Changyu Moser XV was voted as one of the top six wineries in China. With the wines gaining visibility on the export market and with many listings in key London restaurants, plus a very strong social media presence, expect to see demand grow and grow in the coming years.

### 2017 CHATEAU CHANGYU MOSER XV CABERNET SAUVIGNON BLANC DE NOIR

This is the famous white Cabernet; it has lovely floral notes on the nose with hints of exotic fruits. It is fermented in stainless steel and has no wood at all. On the palate you have a lovely fresh acidity and surprisingly citrus fruit. This is the only wine of its kind in the world and it is selling very well in some of London's top restaurant.

### 2016 CHATEAU CHANGYU MOSER XV CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Lots of ripe berried fruit on the nose, this is a very fruit forward style of Cabernet. The expression of the fruit is typically Helan Mountain, according to Moser. It certainly has lots of lovely ripe fruit and is very drinkable. This is also vinified in stainless steel and does not see any wood. In China this has a huge following among Generation Z. I can see why.

### 2016 MOSER FAMILY RED

This is Chateau Changyu Moser's second wine. Moser makes this wine to a specific style using carefully selected grapes. He is still trying to find the region's "style". This wine is made from predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon. There are 2,600 bottles of it in the cellar. The wine had three years in oak barrels and had lovely smoky coffee aromas on the nose. The tannins were very approachable, a lovely soft style.

### 2016 CHATEAU CHANGYU MOSER GRAND VIN

Lovely chocolate and coffee notes on the nose, vanilla and spice with lovely soft red fruit flavours on the palate. Lots of spicy raisin character on the finish and a lovely length and structure. This wine has lots of potential. One to watch. Chateau Changyu Moser wines are distributed in the UK by **Berry Bros & Rudd** and **Bibendum**.

### NINGXIA KANAAN WINERY

Fran Wang likes to call herself "Crazy Fang", so too do most of the wine people in the region, but she is far from crazy, a very astute business woman, who communicates well, her story is about a passion, with wine featuring at the very heart of it.

