

Opinion **FT Magazine**

Would you pay £200 for a bottle of Chinese wine?

Two 'icon wines' from China are being launched in the UK this month – Jancis Robinson assesses their worth

JANCIS ROBINSON

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Jancis Robinson 5 HOURS AGO

Would you pay more than £100 for a bottle of Chinese wine? In the current political climate, perhaps not. You would therefore be unlikely to shell out for either of the ambitiously priced Chinese wines being launched so hopefully in the UK this month.

One was made by an Austrian and one by a Frenchman. In a way, the roots of both wines are Australian, put down long ago when Sino-Australian relations were more cordial than they are today.

Tony Jordan was a hugely admired wine consultant based outside Melbourne. He established Moët & Chandon's Australian sparkling-wine operation in the 1980s and, in 2008, was charged by the parent company LVMH to find the ideal spot in China to produce a copy of the wine the Chinese liked most: red bordeaux.

It wasn't easy. In most Chinese regions, vines have to be buried in winter to save them from fatal freeze — and they don't take kindly to it. The east coast is milder than other parts of the country but has been subject to ill-timed monsoons that play havoc with the grape crop. It took Jordan four years to find one of the most improbable settings for viticulture in the world: on precipitous slopes at 2,500m elevation in the upper reaches of the Mekong valley in Yunnan province, almost on the Tibetan border, overlooked by the Himalayas. Here, winters are warm enough to avoid the annual vine burial and the climate is dry.

Jordan died last year, far too early and much lamented. I thought of him as I tasted the past two vintages, 2015 and 2016 (both £200 approximately), of Ao Yun, the Bordeaux blend that has resulted from his Chinese research.

Maxence Dulou is the man in charge of making Ao Yun. I met him and his family in Yunnan in 2014 before the wine had even been launched. In those days, they lived in the only town of any size in the region, now called Shangri-La, four hours' drive from the winery. For the sake of the children's education, they have since moved to Hong Kong — and Dulou's commute to the winery now takes a day and a half. But he could not be more passionate about the enterprise.

On a phone call from Hong Kong, as I tasted the latest vintage and compared it with the previous one, he was obviously supremely proud of his newest baby. In 2016, his team had subdivided their 28ha of vineyard for the first time into 900 blocks by soil type, water retention and location. This meant they could be sure of pruning, irrigating and picking every grape at the optimum moments. (The altitude of the villages where their grapes are grown can vary by as much as 400m, which means that the grape harvest in the highest, coolest village can be well into November whereas they start picking the lowest sites as early as mid-September.)

At this elevation, winemaking operations have to be recalibrated because the effects of extreme altitude on the role of oxygen and sulphur dioxide, the evaporation rates, the ideal length of maceration and even the logistics of bottling have proved so unlike what happens closer to sea level. Even tasting is skewed. The atmosphere at vineyard altitude is apparently so dry, a bit like on a plane, that the palate dries out and tannins predominate. Dulou now takes his blending decisions in Hong Kong, shipping the 50 to 60 samples of different possible ingredients there.

The other Chinese wine being launched this month is also a concentrated red Bordeaux blend made in 2016. It is the debut vintage of a wine rather clumsily called Purple Air Comes from the East. It comes from the province of Ningxia, south-west of Beijing, which was also well-known to Tony Jordan. (The other half of his brief was to find somewhere for LVMH to establish a sparkling wine operation and Ningxia was where he recommended they build their Chandon winery and plant the vines to supply it.)

The mountain-grown 2016 had a greater resonance for me than the two Ningxia wines

Purple Air is the brainchild of Lenz Moser, a name famous in [Austrian wine](#). Moser has developed the Château Changyu Moser XV brand in co-operation with Changyu, owners of China's oldest winery on the east coast of the country. His previous wines have been well made and some of them well priced, but Moser has clearly set his sights on making an "icon

wine". Purple Air, priced at a cool £150, is apparently a selection of his best barrels and made from "the smallest berries I have ever worked with", thanks to the desert climate.

For most of the past decade, the local government seemed set on making Ningxia the pre-eminent wine province of China with subsidies and initiatives directed at maximising wine quality in this rather barren region watered by the Yellow River. The first team to make wine here that was widely exported was Australian from Jacob's Creek in 2005, under the brand name Helan Mountain.

The fact that both these wines are packaged in particularly heavy bottles suggests they are aimed at the Chinese market with its appreciation of fancy trappings — preferably including an elaborate gift box. According to Dulou, it is very much easier to sell Ao Yun in China than anywhere else, but the aim is to share the 26,000 bottles equally between the US, Europe and Asia.

At the same time, I also tasted the Silver Heights bottling known as The Summit — again the 2016 vintage and, like Purple Air, from Ningxia. This was not made with the backing of a huge company but by a Bordeaux-trained Ningxia native, Emma Gao, who has worked just as hard as Lenz Moser to put her wines on the international map. They are imported into the UK by Oeno.

I have to say that the mountain-grown 2016 had a greater resonance for me than the two Ningxia wines, even if I could think of many better ways to spend £200 on wine (see box below). Dulou confessed that when the wine was launched in 2015 he felt it was overpriced but now that he has seen how much LVMH have invested in the project, he is more sanguine. "And we're not limited financially by LVMH, which is fantastic for me. So I try to enjoy each moment." He added, "I'm very proud of the Chinese team. The Chinese are not afraid of moving mountains. We can change so many things from one day to the next, which is unique to China. This would never have happened so fast anywhere else."

Better buys

I tasted these during lockdown and thought they were particularly good value. All are red unless otherwise stated.

- Rall Red 2017 Swartland

How we score

Our scores

Below is a rough guide to what our numbers mean. Although we are not very comfortable with scoring wines because it is so difficult to encapsulate a wine's qualities in a single score, we do realise how useful scores are for those reading and buying (and selling) in a hurry.

- 20 – Truly exceptional
- 19 – A humdinger
- 18 – A cut above superior
- 17 – Superior
- 16 – Distinguished
- 15 – Average, a perfectly nice drink with no faults but not much excitement
- 14 – Deadly dull
- 13 – Borderline faulty or unbalanced
- 12 – Faulty or unbalanced

Silver Heights	The Summit	2016	Ningxia	2020-06-29	2018 - 2024	16.5
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Emma Gao's vines are at 1,200 m. Emma's father was a pioneer of viticulture in Ningxia and the two of them continue to push boundaries, most recently with the adoption of biodynamics. This blend is 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Merlot, and it spent 12 months in 50% new French oak. 30,000 bottles made.

Dark ruby with a shaded rim. The oak on the nose is not quite as luxurious as that evident on the nose of Ao Yun 2016. Sweet fruit with a little candy edge and the tannins are just slightly less worked. Less luxurious than Ao Yun, but we're talking here about a self-taught one-woman band of a multinational luxury goods company. This is more obviously Cabernet than the Ch Changyu Moser XV Purple Air 2016. Light herbaceousness. Lacks just a little bit of focus.

Ch Changyu Moser XV	Purple Air Comes from the East	2016	Ningxia	2020-06-29	2020 - 2025	16.5
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100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Lenz Moser claims about this wine: 'We only took the best lots from around the chateau; we went for perfect ripeness with not more than 24 °Brix (brown seeds too) hence an honest 14% [intriguing]; double sorting and this was the first year with the new berry sorting machine from Bucher which excluded only 2–3% but these berries were either damaged, green or too big berries; only new French wood barriques; and blending down from the targeted 12,000 bottles to 6,300 bottles of the debut vintage to end up with the style which I believe is the future of Ningxia and the chateau in particular: freshness, elegance, typicity.'

Paler and less purple than Ao Yun 2016 (from vineyards only half as high). Not as intense but very nicely balanced. Sweet and pleasing, with fine tannins. Very nice texture with a reasonably dry, appetising finish. As with the Silver Heights, The Summit 2016, there's a flavour that's sort of like sweet, soaked rope. But there's a nice saltiness on the end. Very nice balance and already drinkable and very smooth. Good energy.

Ao Yun		2016	Yunnan	2020-06-29	2022 - 2028	17 +
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74% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Cabernet Franc, 4% Shiraz planted in 2013, 2% Petit Verdot planted in 2013. Cooler vintage than 2015. Cool and humid until the end of July. For more detail see [Chinese ambition, non-Chinese value](#). 35% new oak, 45% one-year-old barrels, and the rest was aged in their signature baiju jars.

Deep purple. More bordelais than the more bumptious 2015. Aromatic and almost minty. Subtler nose and drier palate with more length. Nobler and much more youthful. Denser and more tightly packed with a series of complex flavours – but overall pretty bordelais. Refined and long. Lots of tannin and ambition.