



Wines That Could Start Fights

Rick Staff
with a remit to sniff, taste,
and spit his way around Nanjing
and disseminate the drinkable.

POINT SYSTEM

0-10	A WARNING
11-14	A Feasible Party Prop
15-17	Heartily Recommended
17-19	Exceptionally Good
20	The Apoogee Of WINE EXPRESSION

■ **G**rape vs. grape is, sometimes, an interesting discussion but these arguments are made much more heated by an average alcohol level pointing north of 14%, I discovered. Is the alcohol hit an essential part of the wine experience, or an inconvenience? Whatever your aesthetic philosophy, and certainly a cold February day in Nanjing can influence one's gustatory motivations, it is clear that alcohol levels in wine are on the rise; whites up from 12 to 13.5% and reds judged to have jumped from 12 to 14% on average over the last twenty years.

There are various schools of thought as to why the trend towards higher alcohol in wine has happened, some blame climate change leading to higher sugar levels, but others say it lies more at the door of the producers themselves, catering to a perceived consumer vogue for rounder, and softer styles. This fuller style is more easily captured by a higher alcohol content, and so the grapes are left longer on the vine to achieve this; in the hands of a master winemaker high levels of alcohol won't necessarily imbalance the wine. All too often, however, a high ABV is immediately noticeable; it generally leads to a fuller-bodied and less acidic wine, but the wine's structure is rendered incoherent, not unlike an unsuspecting recipient (marked ABV levels generally go unnoticed and are frequently understated in any case).

This quartet of Aussie bruisers, set to spar at an all-in very attractive price for the Middle Kingdom at Times Grocery Store, Yunnan Lu, are certainly not pretending to be ballerinas of the wine stage, but they do make for a well-muscled performing troupe with enough definition, and delivering fruit with enough polish and clarity, to be a notch or two above alcohol bomb student party status.

Warming up with The Big Red Shiraz 2011, which surprises straightaway with a sharp bite and a light flyaway-fruit feel, which all makes for a pleasing, slightly peppery, quaffer overall that, for some, would represent great value simply for supplying 14.5% alcohol and asking only ¥60 (14.5 points).

In the deeper shade of red corner is the 1882 Knuckle Buckle Shiraz (1882 is the date the cornerstone wine property was built in the Clare Valley, not the year of vintage; 2010 in this case) and although named after the last bare knuckle world champ, it is, ironically, a bit of a smoothie - silken even - yielding a little chocolate as it slips richly by; a powerful wolf of a Shiraz in sheep's clothing (Merino) and weighing in at 14.5% ABV and ¥80, garnering 16 points.

Next up, we have Jumbo Dynamo, a name and liquid that rolls right off the tongue (and I'm sure you would remember it also as the name of the US's first electric power station), and another product from the 1882 wine company. This is a juicy, fleshy and plummy 2009 Merlot, making for a great roundly-fruited glugger, with a solid 14.5% ABV thump for ¥80, and judged the overall winner on a unanimous Corker verdict of 16.5 points.

We finish with the softer, but still authoritative, 14% goodnight cuff from the aptly named Sleepy Red Cabernet Sauvignon 2011; drink after the other three as it is a bit lean on the fruit with a slightly oily finish, but blackcurrant juiciness is there if you can concentrate, though that won't matter so much at this stage and you may at least find the price tag a tasty digestif in itself at just ¥60 (13.5 points). **NU**

