



CORNER

China's reds (and whites) on the rise?

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 Apogee Of
WINEEXPRESSION



■ Chinese palates are maturing rapidly and confidently, along with their wines. The fifth largest consumer market by volume, China is now the world's second largest grape producer after Italy and the sixth largest wine producer, bottling around 157 million cases a year. True, it is quantity over quality but not all of it is bad; some smaller wineries with a healthier ethos and better expertise than the state enterprises are increasingly being recognized for their quality. I can reveal that at a recent blind tasting of Ningxia and Bordeaux wines here in Nanjing, well, yes, we couldn't really tell the French wines from the Chinese. This of course could merely indicate that some French wines are just as poor as some Chinese ones.

Ningxia is undoubtedly one of the up and coming regions of China's wine scene but arguably also now one of the world's. Winemaker Emma Gao, embellished by a stint in Bordeaux, is gaining international respect at Silver Heights vineyard in the Mount Helan area of Ningxia. I found some of her progeny at New Old Wine World in New City shopping mall; Silver Heights 'Family Reserve' 2007 is a China-friendly (smooth) Bordeaux style with a mix of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Gernischt and Cabernet Franc grapes exhibiting silkily textured blackcurrants against a backdrop of tamed tannins and green pepper notes, and in so doing, at ¥398, knocking many like priced AC Bordeaux into a cocked hat (15.5 points). My similarly graped Silver Heights 'The Summit' 2007 was smoother still where light acids and a medium weight make for a suave package of a variety of black fruits alongside nuances of wet leaves; good but its ¥598 (16 points).

Let us not forget the emerging Shandong, Xinjiang, Gansu and Shanxi provinces. Shanxi's soils on the middle reaches of the yellow river are home to Grace Vineyards, now very much on the global wine map. New Old Wine World houses a good show from Grace, of which the stand out is Tasya's Reserve Merlot 2008. A very Bordeaux take on the grape; serious, but not austere, having enough plummy structure for a satisfying engagement with the palate, it's a forthright wine for adults which should become more lithe in a few years and is a comparatively reasonable ¥199 (16 points). Vintage quality is very erratic in China, so be vigilant, my 2010 Silver Heights Family Reserve tasted at the Ningxia/Bordeaux showdown was disappointing and rated a good few points lower than the recommendation above.

Is the value there for Chinese wines?

Relative value is getting there, barring some irresponsible escapades, if you directly compare the Chinese Bordeaux style wines against your actual Bordeaux available here. However, it will be a long march to maturity; one frustration being the desire to produce facsimiles of red Bordeaux at this point because of the region's perceived status. China's soils could stand quite a few varietals and their food could certainly stand a few more with white wines from grapes such as Gewürztraminer and Riesling well suited to a lot of Chinese fare. This may change via the more prescient merchants, agents and growers, and if you can break the grip that the behemoths (Chang Yu, Great Wall, Dynasty) have on China's complex and expensive distribution network you have one big key to a change.

With 450,000 hectares of vineyards and an increasingly thirsty and sophisticated domestic market then the stage may well be set to, eventually, usurp the old aristocracies of the wine world. Watch this very big space. 