



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
WINEEXPRESSION

Kitsch and the modern China predicament

Go below decks on the brand new Panthalassa superyacht (£131,000 for the week if you fancy a nautical mosey around the Caribbean), and you will be met by a temple to glistening designer luxury repose and, drawing the eye to the centre of it all, a large portrait of the Great Helmsman himself. All smugly ironic intention at such other worldly distance, of course. From tongue-in-cheek decoration to prized period collectibles Chairman Mao has global pull, and within China itself, among myriad merchandise ersatz and otherwise, the revolutionary epoch is increasingly exploited as a brand position; most obviously the restaurants with dungareed work staff serving Hunan (Mao's old manor) cuisine at a profitably brisk pace amid retro red austerity decor. And now there is a perfectly dressed wine for such culinary kitsch.

The new People's Series wines, comprising a Cabernet and a Chardonnay, are produced by up-and-coming Grace Vineyard in China's Shanxi province. The red marketing prong comes courtesy of Grace's distributor Torres China, who were one of the early foreign birds on the China wine scene, and they think the wines will "appeal to the young crowd of new consumers in primary cities, with a packaging and a style that can satisfy their aspirations" with sundry working folk clad in revolution chic cheerfully brandishing bottles of the stuff on the label.

The wine world has not had a really bright marketing idea since Napoleon III knocked up the Bordeaux Exclusive Brands Club back in 1855 (brilliantly disguised as a quality hierarchy); still selling wines by the shed load today. It has also to be said that Napoleon looks king of the hill for sometime yet judging by the sour faces in my focus group of wine-savvy young Chinese professionals vis-à-vis the wines' apparel. The liquid within, though, quickly smoothed any ruffled feathers with both wines receiving genial approval all-round. The People's Chardonnay 2011 is a bit of a pale rider on first reading, and though certainly no block busting fruit bomb it is ready to tell you a story when you are prepared to listen with an easy glide of water melon over the tongue and just a trace of peach; one for bookish repose (14.5 points). The red, which takes its grapes from various vineyard plots around Mt. Helan in neighbouring Ningxia, displays deep red with violet hues at the rim in the glass and smooth vanilla-edged fruit when on the tongue, really quite suave overall, and again no fruit punch this wine but shines as understated China Cab style; mellow with just a suggestion of blackcurrant (15 points). Now mix the two together and you will have those rose tinted glasses you might need to view the label through.

I wonder who the marketing whizzes are targeting - my ensembles' sneers suggest that China's burgeoning wine drinkers from the middle classes may require a more nuanced understanding than mustered by this stab at the segment, and though the wines might look good on the tables of those red canteens they would be a bad match for the Hunan spice, leaving just the really rich kids who demand wine bling of 'LV' elevation (Napoleon's club). Is it you they're looking for? Expats who may find it all a lot of fun (and there seem to be plans afoot to export) can order from Everwines (302 Zhongyang Lu - Tel 8960 3178), and for ¥99 a piece (a currency still emblazoned with Mao's image) surely an appealing paradox per se; these wines do retail for near enough a People's Price for the quality, which is marketing we can all understand. 

