

Winemakers rise to Ningxia challenge

Vineyard region gets a boost from international experts competing over two years to produce a world-class drop

By WANG HAO and LI XIANG

From the four corners of the Earth they came, armed with the knowledge, wisdom and patience that would help them and their hosts rise to the challenge placed before them.

For the 48 winemakers from 16 countries, this remote area of the Ningxia Hui autonomous region, in Northwest China, became not only their second home, but also a test lab over the past two years as they worked to find the perfect drop.

They came from premier wine regions, such as Clare Valley in South Australia, Colchagua Valley in Chile, Bordeaux in France and Marlborough in New Zealand.

They also came from less well-known wine-making countries, such as India, Bulgaria and Moldova, eager to see what they could do with a terroir that is fast turning the region into a winner with the world's wine connoisseurs.

Terroir is a term for the unique taste and flavor imparted to a wine by the environment in which it is produced.

The aim of their mission was to produce a wine to match the region with the world's best. The reward, apart from medals of gold or silver and the opportunity to create a new wine sensation, was a share in a 700,000 yuan (\$108,000) bounty from the Ningxia government.

Each entrant was given tutelage over a 3-hectare block of land and was paired with a local winery to produce a cabernet.

The efforts came to full fruition on Aug 29 when five international winemakers, including Justin Corrans of South Africa from Chateau Lanxuan and Tony Kalleske of Australia from Legacy Peak Estate, claimed a gold prize.

Silver prizes went to 10 winemakers, including Nova Cadamatre of the United States from Lansai Chateau, Matthew Van Der Spuy of the United Kingdom from Domaine Luoshan and Mariana Paze of Argentina from Chateau Bacchus.

However, the biggest winner of all was the wine industry of Ningxia, centered on the eastern foothills of the Helan Mountains, whose winemakers have been the beneficiaries of barrel loads of indispensable expertise and tips over the past two years.

Yet, as crucial as these may be in shaping the industry in the area over the coming years, it is not as though the region is exactly new to wine making. Wines from the eastern foothills have won more than 200 international prizes in recent years, and Jancis Robinson, a respected British wine critic, has said the region is on the cusp of being able to



Thierry Courtade, a winemaker from the Bordeaux region of France, at Silver Heights winery, which he and his wife run in Northwest China's Ningxia Hui autonomous region. Courtade became acquainted with Ningxia through his wife, who was an intern at the Bordeaux winery where he worked. FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

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THIERRY COURTADE
A winemaker from the Bordeaux region of France

produce world-class wines.

That evaluation has been validated by the interest of so many international winemakers in the competition, which was its second vintage, the first being the Ningxia International Winemakers Challenge in 2012.

The first competition was small in comparison, with 10 winemakers from Australia, France, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain and the United States.

"No one would waste their time if there was nothing in this," Cao Kailong said of the competition. Cao is director of the Ningxia Bureau of Grape Industry Development, which organized the competition.

"They come because they believe this area has what it takes to create legends."

That ability, as is almost always the case in wine making, boils down to one essential element: Geography.

The region receives 1,700 to 2,000 hours of sunshine a year. And with little annual rainfall — between 150 and 240 millimeters — the cool nights help grapes develop acidity and flavor.

The Yellow River, which runs through the area, has helped make its soil composition a favorable mixture of sand, clay and minerals. An altitude of about 1,300 meters and extremely dry air mean no pesticides are needed to keep the vines healthy.

The region has about 40,000 hectares of vineyards, the world's second-largest after Bordeaux in southwestern France, and there are 83 established wineries and 113 more being built, Cao said.

"The presence of international winemakers has been helping to improve the quality of the wines and enrich the local wine-making technique and winery management.

"Locals can learn from the expertise of their partners, whether it be with knowledge, ideas or techniques. Their presence has also developed our confidence in China, not only being a big consumer of wines, but in becoming a major producer of fine wines."

Renger Mathias, an Austrian participant in the competition, said: "I wanted to be part of the team that helps the Chinese wine industry become a landmark on the global wine map, to reflect its globally unique terroir."

Over the two years of the competition, winemakers stayed for varying periods in the area. Thierry Courtade, who had worked for 23 years for Chateau Calon Segur in Bordeaux, chose to settle down after he married a local woman.

Courtade became acquainted with Chinese wines and the region through his wife, Emma Gao, who was an intern at the Bordeaux winery.

"The wine industry in France has reached such a high level that it can go no higher," Courtade said. "But here in Ningxia, I am able to try new things, planting different grape varieties that suit the soil and applying different wine-making techniques."

While Bordeaux has stringent regulations specifying which varieties of grapes, materials and techniques can

be used in certain regions, Ningxia is open to different trials and has yet to establish similar rules, Courtade said.

Nevertheless, the winemakers of the eastern foothills of the Helan Mountains have their work cut out before their wines are accepted as top of the class throughout the world.

Gaston Sepulveda, a competition entrant from Argentina, said the local government needs to put more effort into branding and keeping up with wine-making technology.

"The wines here are very good, but it's difficult to see Ningxia's wine in the international consumer market. I think this is something Ningxia should pay attention to.

"Wine management technology in each winery of Ningxia varies widely: Some of them are highly advanced, while others are relatively outdated. I think if this wine region wants to keep making good wines, this issue should be taken seriously"

Eleni Papdakis, an entrant from the US, said the eastern foothills of the Helan Mountain have huge potential, and Ningxia needs to broaden its horizons, try more varieties and put more effort into branding and marketing.

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