



Left: A grape farmer prunes vines at the eastern foot of Helan Mountain in Ningxia. Right: A wine cellar with rows of barrels belonging to Chateau Hedong in the Helan Mountain wine region.

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Ningxia's wine industry goes global

International partners help regional sector's expansion plans, through competition using local grapes, **Li Xiang** reports.

China's emerging wine region in the north-western Ningxia Hui autonomous region is rapidly gaining global attention, as local authorities seek to pool international experience and techniques with local resources, to turn the region into a notable spot on the world wine map.

The region has laid out an ambitious plan of investing at least 2 billion yuan (\$300 million) to boost wine production to 200 million bottles a year with a sales value of 6 billion yuan in 2017, according to the Ningxia Grape Industry Development Bureau.

Cao Kailong, director of the bureau, said that boosting international awareness of the quality wines produced in Ningxia will help the region achieve this goal.

The local authority has been inviting international winemakers and experts to Ningxia to work with local wineries and participate in winemaking competitions.

Cao said the presence of international winemakers has helped develop the local wine industry in Ningxia, one of the world's youngest wine regions in dire need of fine winemaking techniques, professionals and winery management.

"Their presence makes us more confident that Ningxia could develop into a leading wine region in China that is capable of producing world-class wines," Cao said.

Ningxia is the first region in China to set up a wine industry administration at the provincial level. In 2012, it joined the International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV) as an observer.

Cao said the local government's priority is to transform the region's advantage of being a vine-friendly environment into wine production capabilities, and to develop Ningxia into a respected region in the international wine industry.

Located on the eastern foot of the Helan Mountain, the area now has about 40,000 hectares of vineyards, the sec-



An overview of workers tending vineyards. Experts have commented on Ningxia's good terroir and climate.



Source: Ningxia Grape Industry Development Bureau

Economic figures

Ningxia's growing grape industry in 2016

- 120,000 jobs provided by the grape industry
- 41,300 hectares coverage of vines
- 86 chateaux established
- 113 chateaux under construction
- 350,000 tourists received at 21 chateaux
- 120 million bottles of wine produced

Climate

1,000 meters average altitude

12-15° celcius average difference between the daily low and high temperature

1,700-2,000 hours of sunshine a year

Ningxia wine

Types of wine produced

White grapes

70% Chardonnay

30% Others (Italian Riesling, Riesling, Vidal Blanc, etc.)

Red grapes

70% Cabernet Sauvignon

10% Cabernet Gernischt

5% Others (Pinot Noir, Syrah, Marselan, Dornfelder, Petit Verdot, Beimei)

15% Merlot

ond largest in the world after France's Bordeaux region and there are nearly 200 wineries in production or currently being established, according to Cao.

To meet international winemaking standards, the region has also launched a classification system and region conservation regulations.

Li Jialong, manager at Chateau Mihope, a winery invested in by Chinese billionaire He Xiangjian — founder of Chinese electrical appliance maker Midea Group — said the winery's Australian and

French winemakers were impressed by the terroir of Ningxia, although the region still needs to improve its overall wine management and regulations.

"They have shared a lot of valuable experience in planting grapes, preventing diseases and managing wineries with us," Li said.

As a fast-growing region, wines from Ningxia have made impressive achievements in international and domestic wine contests in recent years, boasting a string of international awards.

The arrival of international winemakers has also brought the press and media from their home countries to visit Ningxia, helping increase the international exposure of the region.

Gaston Sepulveda, a winemaker from Argentina, said that the local government needs to put more effort into branding and keeping up with winemaking 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," Sepulveda said.

"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," he added.

Eleni Papdakis, a winemaker from the United States, said the eastern foothills of the Helan Mountain has huge potential, while Ningxia needs to broaden its horizons, try more varieties and

put more effort into branding and marketing.

Li Demei, leading Chinese wine expert and professor at Beijing Agriculture University, said: "The arrival of foreign winemakers has catapulted the Ningxia wine-producing region and its winemaking technical teams closer to the international arena."

On the other hand, he said, foreign winemakers will need to have good understanding of local conditions, including the climate and soil, to be able to put their winemaking concepts and skills to good use.

As to the progress of Ningxia wines in the international market, Li said there was no need to rush.

"The Chinese wine market is the fastest-growing in the world," he said.

"The whole world is vying for the market, so of course it should also be the priority of Chinese local wines."

Cao said that the local authorities have been cooperating with international wine traders and professional institutions to promote Ningxia's brands.

The administration has also signed an agreement with Liv-ex, a global marketplace for professional buyers and sellers of fine wine in London, hoping to launch a futures index for Ningxia's wines soon, according to Cao.

Meanwhile, the region continues to attract investment from international winemakers and distributors. French companies LVMH and Pernod Ricard, as well as Spanish wine producer Torres, have made notable investments to build wineries in Ningxia.

Su Long, estate director of Chandon China, the sparkling wine brand owned by LVMH, said that the company has invested 170 million yuan in Ningxia and planned to boost its production to 1.8 million bottles a year by 2019.

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What they say

Both in the awards (the first Ningxia Wine Awards) and at several wineries, it was clear that Ningxia's raw material (assuming that is what we were tasting) is impressively consistent. Moet may be betting on sparkling white (rose doesn't sell in China), but the great majority of what is currently produced in Ningxia is red — mostly Cabernet and Merlot, as is the Chinese way. The wines have an attractive frankness of fruit, rarely more than 13 percent alcohol, nicely balanced by natural acidity and — oxidation apart — were generally both clean and expressive.

Jancis Robinson, Master of Wine, British wine critic, journalist and wine writer



The possibilities of marketing Ningxia to the wine world are endless. The grapes have the possibility to be incredible as the growing season is so conducive for ripe, balanced and tasty fruit. But the vineyards need to be extra vigilant about varieties planted (the right choices) and ensure they are planting the varieties they think they are planting (utilizing good plant sources). It is fantastic that the region is promoting itself as the Bordeaux of China, the climate for these varieties is fantastic.

Jennifer Bound, New Zealand winemaker



Ningxia has opened up a whole new world of wine possibilities for the international arena. Not only is the area catapulting at a great pace but is also terroir and cultivar driven and most well-known for Cabernet Sauvignon, the star of Ningxia. The vast dramatic landscape of mountains, rivers and deserts is part of the enigma of Ningxia that makes it so intriguing.

Alwyn Liebenberg, winemaker from South Africa



As a new wine region, the eastern foothills of the Helan Mountain has unique advantages and potential in natural factors such as climate and soil. For example, there are adequate light and heat resources, large temperature differences between day and night, deep soil layers, little rainfall and Yellow River irrigation. These natural conditions can ensure that grapes obtain a relatively satisfactory maturity, which is the basic condition for making quality wines.

Patrick Soye, French winemaker



I have tasted and judged around 142 different Chinese wines a year for the international wine guide *Gilbert & Gaillard*, the majority from this region, and Ningxia has everything it needs to become one of the leading wine regions of the world.

Fortunato Alessio, Italian winemaker



The rising Ningxia will be just like Australia in the coming future, creating its own unique history and characteristics. And it is undeniable that with distinctive advantages in both climate and soil conditions, Ningxia is very suitable for cultivating wine. I have witnessed local winemakers' efforts in creating wines with Ningxia characteristics. Ningxia's terroir is special and there are many variable and unique wineries.

Chris Sargeant, winemaker from Australia



Chateau's legacy bodes well for area's aspiring vineyards

By **LIYOU**
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The eastern foot of the Helan Mountain in the Ningxia Hui autonomous region, although known as a newly emerged wine region in China, does not lack for aged grapevines.

Chateau Legacy Peak, founded in 2011, has grapevines of around 20 years of age in Ningxia. The vines planted by the current owner's father in 1997 were among the first batch of Cabernet grapes introduced to Ningxia.

Liu Hai, the vineyard's owner, described his first encounter with the grapes as a "coincidence", because at first, his family's land was designed to produce red grapes for eating, rather than Cabernet.

However, the red grape

seedlings proved insufficient for the whole area of Liu's land, so the family decided to plant wine grapes on the remaining sections of the 20 hectares of land.

"Our winery was the first to plant these grapes in this mountainous region. At that time, we didn't have any experience to learn from," Liu said.

"At first, the cost of removing the stones and the overall field management in this mountainous area was much higher compared to that in sandy soils. The wine grapes couldn't sell for a good price on the Chinese market. The high input and low payback drove us to make a painful decision — to let the wine grapevines grow and die in their own course," Liu said.

In 2010, Liu's father wanted to quit his job and let his sons



Liu Hai, owner of Chateau Legacy Peak in Ningxia, inspects wine quality in a cellar.

inherit the vineyard or else just sell it.

"However, my mother was strongly opposed to the decision to sell the field. She urged

us to come back to run the vineyard, so I undertook the task," Liu said.

The year 2011 marked the starting point for Chateau

Legacy Peak making wines. From a fruit grower to a winery owner, Liu experienced a great transformation.

Gradually, Liu discovered that the alluvial fan-shaped soil created by the impact of raindrops on the Helan Mountain resulted in a layer of sand and a layer of gravel in the earth, providing a good foundation for grapevines to root down deeply into the soil.

The deeper the vines are, the more mineral substances and phenolic compounds they can take in. Gradually, the chateau improved its winemaking techniques and has received good market feedback.

The secret of Liu's wine is to work with nature, said Zhou Shuzhen, a winemaker in Chateau Legacy Peak.

"Throughout our winemaking process, we tried to highlight the natural characteristics of the grapes in the wines, instead of using food additives to change its natural beauty," Zhou said.

At first, the grape growers lost confidence as their fruit did not sell well. But after 20 years, in 2016, the total sales revenue of the winery hit 14 million yuan (\$2.09 million), according to Liu.

Tony Kalleske, an Australian winemaker who worked in Chateau Legacy Peak, said: "Ningxia has a bright future ahead both for winemaking and tourism, with its natural rugged beauty and long, rich history. The bottles of Legacy Peak Cabernet and Chardonnay that I brought back to Australia were well received and surprised many people with their quality."