



16 December 2012



*Moët & Chandon's winery under construction in Ningxia.*

### **LISA MURRAY**

Emma Gao is scrambling to stop the leak. A steady stream of red wine is flying through the air, having escaped her stained and sticky hands, and for just a second she looks helpless. But in no time at all, the nimble 36-year-old winemaker has composed herself, reattached the seal to the oak barrel and is busily trying to break into its neighbour. The air is damp in her tiny cellar at the back of a modest farmhouse on the outskirts of Yinchuan, in China's northwest.

Having provided her guests with a glass of cabernet from her family's Silver Heights winery, Gao explains with a grin that the leak was entirely the fault of her husband and fellow winemaker, Frenchman Thierry Courtade. It was Courtade, she insists, who attached the faulty seal. Up above ground, her family is preparing a feast to celebrate the harvest. Wine glasses lie abandoned in the empty courtyard overlooking the vineyards, which stretch toward the city, framed by a row of high-rise apartment blocks.



*Emma Gao, Silver Heights winery co-owner and winemaker.  
Photo by Philip Gostelow*



If it weren't for the view or the Chinese-style banquet table inside, complete with Lazy Susan, the house could be somewhere in the south of France. But it's not – it's in Ningxia, an impoverished, remote and largely Muslim province in northern China. One of the country's five autonomous regions, it sits south of the Gobi desert, about 900 kilometres west of Beijing, and is the world's latest frontier in winemaking.

Gao has quickly become its poster girl. Trained in Bordeaux, she is photogenic, speaks four languages, and, according to leading British wine critic Jancis Robinson, makes very good wine. Silver Heights produces 30,000 bottles of red wine a year, all blends of cabernet sauvignon, franc and gernischt grapes, which are sold out 12 months in advance. Gao supplies most of the top restaurants and hotel chains in China, including the Kempinski, Grand Hyatt and Aman Resorts. The Gaos have secured land to plant more vineyards and build their own contemporary winery. In keeping with the cosmopolitan family members and their global ambitions, the brand appears in both English and Chinese characters on the wine label.

Emma's father, Gao Lin, realised in the 1990s that Ningxia, the third poorest province in China, had near perfect conditions for growing grapes, particularly cabernet. The region has gravelly soil, high intra-day temperatures, low humidity, lots of sunshine and almost no rain. It also has China's second-longest river, the Yellow River, running through it, providing irrigation for the vineyards. While not without its challenges – the temperature can plunge to minus 30 degrees in winter, forcing grape growers to bury their vines – these conditions have attracted the attention of the biggest names in winemaking. Pernod Ricard, owner of Australia's Jacob's Creek, which moved into Ningxia four years ago, sells wine under the Helan Mountain label, named after the nearby range. More recently, LVMH Group, makers of Moët & Chandon, chose the nascent region as its base for making home-grown Chinese 'champagne'.

Moët is partnering with state-owned wine company, Xi Xia King, the oldest and biggest of the grape growers in Ningxia. Despite an eight-month delay in securing the land for its new winery about 40 kilometres outside the capital Yinchuan, Moët is on track to start selling bottles of Chinese bubbles next year, according to Xi Xia King's chairman Wang Hong.

The sparkling wine (which can't be called champagne because it is not made in that region northeast of Paris) will be sold under Moët's international brand, Chandon. Wang says it will probably retail for the same price it's sold elsewhere, or roughly \$30 a bottle in Australia. It's not the French luxury group's first foray into China's wine and spirits market. It also owns Wenjun, a brand of the popular spirit Beiju, and a stake in a Yunnan winery in China's south. For its champagne venture, Moët tried unsuccessfully to lure Emma Gao away from the family business but she chose to stay committed to Silver Heights, which has expansion plans of its own. "We were the first winery in Ningxia that Moët visited," says Gao Lin. "Our winery would have had to close if Emma left, so she chose not to take part in their project."

Both he and his daughter agree Moët's sparkling wine venture is an important milestone for the local wine industry. "Ningxia will develop more quickly now because with Moët comes a lot of media interest and more government support for the industry," says Emma. "People have started paying attention to Ningxia as a quality wine region."

Spurred on by the extra attention, the local government has a grand vision for the area's development. Over the next 10 years, it wants to establish the longest continuous grape-



# THE AUSTRALIAN Financial Review Magazine

growing corridor in the world, build more than 700 kilo-metres of roads and upgrade its electricity and irrigation systems. It is also overseeing the construction of 230 'chateaux', or wine-producing estates, a 'wine culture' wall, and a designated tourist town in a bid to attract large numbers of visitors. Somewhat controversially, the big-name Chinese players have opted for wineries that look like European-style chateaux with faux turrets and lavish fountains, many of which look out of place in the arid landscape of northwestern China.



*The newly completed French classical styled chateau for the huge Chinese winery Changyu.  
Photo by Philip Gostelow*

But Ningxia has a long way to go before it ranks alongside the Loire, Barossa and Napa Valleys of the world. It's remote, the hotels in Yinchuan tend to cater to the business traveller, and while the local dish of roast lamb and soy sauce is tasty, there are no signature restaurants. Many restaurants don't allow patrons to drink alcohol as the Muslim Hui people make up a third of Ningxia's population.

The region's main tourist attraction to date is the Wolfberry Museum (wolfberries are a popular fruit grown in the area which are mostly eaten dried, as a snack), while the road from the airport to the vineyards is lined with chemical factories, steelworks and power plants. The number of factories and coalmines has mushroomed since 2000, when Beijing launched its 'go west' strategy to lure foreign investment to its poorer western provinces so they might replicate the economic development of the east coast. The initiative coincided with a move by wealthier regions to clean up pollution and improve their environmental credentials, pushing more factories out west.

Philip Laffer, leading winemaker for Jacob's Creek and a consultant on Pernod Ricard's Ningxia venture, says it's not yet a place for wine tourism. "There are interesting places there but you don't go to look at the vineyards and the wineries," he says. Laffer has called for the region to attract well-known Chinese architects to create their own version of a chateau: "One that owes nothing to France, Germany or Australia but everything to modern China." He says while it may not have the aesthetics quite right, the region is starting to produce very good wine. "It's already surprising China with the quality of its wine, and I think it will soon surprise the world."

There is nothing faux about Moet's new Ningxia headquarters. Even unfinished, the building is impressive. Its towering feature wall has an undulating cement surface with stainless steel posts jutting out, in an imitation of the vineyards it overlooks. On an unofficial tour of the site, one of the project managers explains that lights will shine from below to create a dramatic set of shadows at night, while during the day the sun will reflect off the posts. Hong Kong-based Australian architect Ed Billson, the project's principal designer, says the wall



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was inspired by his first trip to the area in winter. He took detailed photos of the buried vines and based his design on the images.

“We didn’t want to build a French chateau because people are over the schmaltzy stuff,” says Billson, whose firm MAP also designed the French group’s Wenjun distillery in Sichuan and is working on its Chandon winery in India. “People in China want the new, new thing,” he says. “They want to see cutting edge, modern architecture so we went for the shock of the new.” The concept for the building, parts of which are cased in corrugated iron, is ‘casual chic’. The entrance is set off by a grassy slope, leading up to a terrace with a 360-degree view of surrounding vineyards, the distant turbines of a wind farm and the mountains beyond. Moet hasn’t said publicly how much the new digs will cost, but according to its joint venture partner, Xi Xia King, the French group will spend more than US\$175 million on its move into Ningxia. “It will look very posh,” says our tour guide.

It’s all part of the plan to appeal to China’s fashion-conscious, high-income earners. Or perhaps even to those a rung below, who aspire to be like the millionaire quaffing French champagne at the next table but can more comfortably afford the local version and won’t be embarrassed to drink it. It’s a potentially lucrative market, but there’s still some convincing to do. Some 99.5 per cent of wines drunk in China are non-sparkling wines and of those, red wine accounts for 91 per cent of the total.

But the market is changing fast. Consumption of sparkling wine has grown five-fold over the past decade. And the Chinese appear to be taking to white wine, with consumption up 19 per cent last year. Between 2006 and 2010, China’s consumption of all wines grew by 140 per cent to 1.5 billion bottles, according to industry group Vinexpo. Last year, China became the fifth biggest consumer of wine in the world, behind the US, Italy, France and Germany. Laffer says China is similar to Japan in the 1980s, which was dominated by middle-aged men drinking red wine: “Japan today is a whole different market. It’s young, independent woman drinking white wine, which goes so well with Japanese food. Red wine was 98 per cent of the market; now it is around 70 per cent. We are beginning to see that same change in China.”

For now, the numbers are in Emma Gao’s favour, as Silver Heights looks to triple its production of red wine over the next five years. Competing designs for the new winery are strewn over the family’s heavy wood coffee table, which is pockmarked from bearing the load of countless wine bottles over the years. Gao insists their winery won’t be another French castle. She is aiming for a modern-style building and something that relates to the mountains in which it will nestle.

The numbers also appear to be in Ningxia’s favour. “Moet took three years to make their decision,” says Gao. “They came out and did serious due diligence and they chose here ... Five years ago, we couldn’t sell anything in Ningxia for 300 yuan (\$47) a bottle. Now people often say, ‘what do you have that’s more expensive?’”

*With assistance from translator Lucy Gao.*

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