The wineries of Ningxia

20 Sep 2012 by Jancis Robinson

While in Ningxia I tried to make sense of this burgeoning Chinese wine region's wineries. Here's a list in very rough order of their establishment with my very personal comments about them. There are fewer than 20 here but the local winery association has 26 members. Officials, who tend to exaggerate everything, claim there are 38 - and, as outlined in this official document, they want to see 70. You may also like to see my tasting notes on Ningxia wines - and marvel at the wide variation in prices of them.

Note that there are few rules about how many words in names. In Yinchuan, the capital of Ningxia, for example, I saw the name written variously as Yinchuan and Yi Chuan. Leirenshou is also written Lei Ren Shou. And so on.

I am indebted to wine student and owner of wine business Pinot Noir I Beijing Huang Shan and wine academic and consultant Demei Li (also called Li De Mei) for all the help they gave me in unearthing information, although the opinions are all my own.

**Xi Xia King (1984)**
The oldest winery, built originally with government funds by Chinese trained in Bordeaux in 1984 but now with the hugest £8 million, 8,000 sq m 'chateau'-style temple to modern Chinese winemaking (think acres of marble, massive welcome committee, VIP lounges, lecture halls and meeting rooms by the score, landscaped gardens, and some of the most extensive established vineyards in Ningxia). The new Chandon sparkling wine venture is based here - complete with luxurious Hennessy salon - while building its own winery and planting its vines nearby. Château Jade Spring was the brand we were served. They still have the original old winery nearby, too. 2,533 ha of vineyards currently.
Guangxia (Yinchuan)/Helan Mountain (1997/8)
The almost Soviet look of this down-at-heel wine factory was a bit of a shock after all the lavish architectural fantasies I had seen earlier in the day. Guangxia's 55 ha of vines, planted on reclaimed desert from 1998 (when the great reclamation started, the land being no good for anything else and there was a need to move people from the mountains to do something else), make this operation self-sufficient. This is the outfit where Pernod Ricard have made their varietals under the Helan Mountain name for the last four years, but they take only about a quarter of the fruit grown here, from three different sites. The American brand Dragon's Hollow is also made here (quite independently of Pernod Ricard, which sends winemaker and viticulturist teams up here every so often from Orlando in Australia). Purple Tree may be another brand made here. 2,133 ha of vineyards currently. These red peppers drying in one corner of the winery are a common sight in China.

Dynasty/Imperial Horse (1998)
Dynasty is one of the biggest wine companies in China but the rumour was that all was not smooth with this joint venture with a Chinese Canadian currently. Extensive vineyard holdings. Vine age may play a part in how well their wines showed in the Ningxia Wine Awards.

Château Bacchus (1999, 2006)
Lot of European architecture and national sales effort. I tasted an acceptable if not thrilling 2009 Cabernet. In 2009 they planted 400 ha of vines.

Kemian (2002)
Looks very industrial in the brochure with a brand rather strangely called Cast'aly featured. Old brand with no vineyards. Wasn't mentioned by anyone. Maybe defunct?

Hequan (2002)
Another that was in the brochure but of which no one spoke. The main brand is Heyu but they have no vineyards. In the Yuquanying heartland district.

Château Hedong (2002)
The holding company is Ningxia Helan Mountain Donglu Château Wines Co. May be run by a friend of Li De Mei's as I heard mention of it… 100 ha of vines.

Leirenshou (2002)
Owned privately by a local. Dark red chateau quite near Xi Xia King in Yuquanying. 66 ha vines. Named after the sun god for the Chinese.

He Lan Qing Xue (2005)
Owned jointly by the local official wine association and by those who work there. Experimental showcase winery which produced the Jiabeilan Grand Reserve 2009 that won a Decanter trophy in 2011. Winemaker is the bubbly, diminutive Jing Zhang and the hugely respected professor De Mei Li has consulted here since its origins in 2005. They own 10-12 ha themselves, much of it around the winery, and buy in enough grapes to fill 30,000-40,000 bottles a year. They are constructing what will be a very smart showcase for all the local
wineries and already have a small wine museum designed to instil wine culture. Very much part of the official Vinification of Ningxia process. We also tasted the two Jaibelan 2009 bottlings again here.

**Changyu (2005)**
China's biggest wine producer whose original base is Yantai (Shandong). They're the ones whose top wine is all about packaging and sells for truly ridiculous prices. Massive 'chateau-style' building was built in 2008 with grape processing establishment (Changyu-Ningxia Grape Production Base Co) started in 2005. Annual production 25,000 tons though apparently they have relatively few vineyards as yet. Their Ningxia Cabernet Gernischt Blend was launched by Waitrose in Sep 2012 (see this wine of the week).

**Kingwine (2006)**
They have 200 ha of vines.

**Silver Heights (2007)**
The Le Pin of Ningxia. Super-vivacious French- and English-speaking Emma Gao worked for Torres and was sent by her father to Bordeaux, where she picked up the scion of Calon Ségur's winemaker family as a husband. He has just moved permanently to China; their daughter is seven. Operates out of a tiny winery on the outskirts of the capital Yinchuan on the basis of 15 ha of 15-year-old Cabernet Gernischt vines tended by her 70-year-old father and in 2012 they started their own Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard 15 minutes away. Hand-crafted everything. Prime target for Riedel although, oddly, not in the official brochure.

**Daylong (2007)**
Owned by Chinese family (Daysun group), resident in Thailand, and Macao Jinlong group, who have planted soft (mechanisable) fertile soils and are aiming for as close to organic as possible. Li De Mei doesn't approve of the fact that they have not constructed ditches to facilitate banking up vines, and although there is clearly a massive amount of viticultural work exposing the bunches, they are almost touching the ground. They claim to have 8,000 ha of vines!

**MoBei (2007)**
32 ha of vines, owned by the National Real Estate Company.

**Château St Louis Ding (??)**
Chutzpah United. The brochure and their labels make much of their Loireish chateau and the views from it when in fact it is a shell surrounded by scaffolding without a paved road in sight. Privately owned despite the name of the owner: Ningxia Jiuyuan Agriculture and Forestry Development Ltd Company (sic). Vines are said to be 11 years old. Far Sight is a second brand. 173 ha of vines.

**Grace Vineyards (2008)**
This Hong Kong-owned very proficient producer based in Shanxi to the east have 1,000 mu (around 67 ha) of vineyard in Gan Cheng Zix County, Qing Tong Xia City, Ningxia, and are planning to build a small winery there as well. At the moment, they are doing this project on their own.

**Ning Xia Hong (2012)**
They also own Ch Grand Moueys in Bordeaux.
COFCO (2013)
The massive company that owns the Great Wall brand. Vast industrial-scale winery aimed at being a tourist centre is currently being built on a spectacular gentle slope close to the foot of the mountains surrounded by 1,500 ha of pebbly soil which Li De Mei points out is not mechanisable. But there are great views, of the famous ancient tombs and then Yinchuan in the distance. Apparently 1,000 ha could be vineyard and 150 ha were planted in 2012.

Chandon (2013)
Sparkling wine project, twin of a Yunnan still red wine one. It was started under Xi Xia King auspices, with the 2012 vintage. They want to plant 50:50 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir but are having problems with imports of the latter plant material, therefore so far they have only Chardonnay. 100% owned 5,300 sq m winery will open in 2013. Vineyards, about 80 ha, are a joint venture with Xi Xia King.

Tianzun (2013)
Small independent 200-ton winery being planned by a chic Chinese businesswoman with advice from Xi Xia King.

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