

WINES OF NINGXIA

Tasted at the Society of Wine Educators Conference, August 2016

I had been looking forward to this seminar and tasting of what I hoped would encompass some of the star wines of Ningxia, China, a nascent region still unknown to the outside world – yet one with considerable early promise. Having acted as a judge for two competitions in connection with the 2014 Beijing Wine Expo, I had a particular interest in this session, which followed my own presentation entitled “Chinese Wine Today” at the Society’s 2015 Conference. There was a wealth of technical facts presented by Houghton Lee CWE, CSS about Ningxia and its ongoing development – information which is, I myself know, exceedingly difficult to obtain. Based in Hong Kong, Houghton leads groups on visits of Ningxia and has privileged access to its top producers. Tasting these wines, many of which have already attained cult status in China, would otherwise have been impossible as they are not yet commercially available in the U. S.

Considering the wines as a group, it is clear that the early reputation of Ningxia as, potentially, a world-class region for red Bordeaux grapes, is largely justified. This is not to say that improvements cannot be made, but they revolve around production techniques rather than innate fruit quality (although polyphenolic maturity can no doubt be refined). In particular, the use of oak demands further study in terms of wood origin, percentage of new barrels, and length of *élevage*. Indeed, my quality assessments would have been higher across the board had it not been for obtrusive wood influence. Oak should complete and bring out a wine rather than dominate – or at least that’s my view.

Kanaan Winery Riesling 2013 ***

Pale yellow gold. The nose is clean yet non-aromatic, low-toned and without distinctive expression. On the palate, the wine is direct, clean and completely dry but lacks the enticing Riesling aromas which characterize the best global renditions. 12% alc, TA 5.8, pH 3.25, RS 3.5.

Legacy Peak Chardonnay 2014 ***

Pale gold. Overtly ripe yellow fruit in the aroma together with pronounced new oak. The palate impression is immediately creamy, toasty and woody. Medium plus in weight, this Chardonnay has moderate acidity and true varietal characteristics although the oak is overly dominant. 13.5% alc, TA 6.4, pH 3.67 (typo? – the pH seems very high). 9 months in new French oak.

Sha Po Tou Cabernet Gernischt 2013 ***

Nearly dense very dark red with purple rim. Warm, concentrated nose marked by ripe dark berries and herbal-herbaceous accents. In the mouth, this Chinese Carmenère has both flesh and structure. Medium bodied plus, the wine imparts dusty highlights and finishes somewhat short, delivering astringent oak in the final taste. The raw material is solid, but the barrel regime has taken center stage. 13% alc, TA 5.8, pH 3.86. 24 months in new French oak.

Domain Pushang Marselan 2014 *+**

Opaque black purple, viscous, with fine tartrate crystals. This cross (Grenache X Cabernet Sauvignon) is dense to the nose with ample, ripe dark berries as well as marked oak and a note of raw wood. There is generous fruit and flesh in this full-bodied example, but the oak is prominent rather than well integrated. The finish is dry, with moderately high acidity. Another example of the potential of Marselan, a variety winemakers in China should certainly pursue based on the iterations I have tasted. 14% alc, TA 6.1, pH not provided. 90% Marselan, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon aged 12 months in 2nd use French (70%) and American (30%) oak.

Ch. Zihui Yuanshi Son of Mountain 2011 ****

Moderately dense dark red with clear purple rim. The nose offers a fragrance of dark red fruits together with toasted oak and a green accent. In the mouth, this blend possesses concentration and equilibrium. Full-bodied and warm, with contrasting dark fruit and herbal flavors in the aftertaste. Dry, firm and slightly astringent. May gain with further refinement in bottle. 13.5% alc, TA 5.5, pH 3.61. 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Merlot matured 16 months in new French oak.

Helanqingxue Jiabeilan Qingxue 2013 ** (+)**

Moderately dense dark red. Aromatically, this attractive blend expresses dark red fruit and a dusty note along with moderate concentration and well-integrated oak. The wine is balanced, medium weight plus, with a successful marriage of fruit and oak. The finish is clean and dry, with a lingering youthful astringency. A well-made, harmonious red modeled after Bordeaux, yet distinctive, which was one of the first Ningxia wines to garner international recognition. 13% alc, TA 5.8, pH 3.75. 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Merlot aged 12 months in a combination of used French and Hungarian oak (70%) and new French oak (30%). The large Merlot component was a savvy decision as it has filled out and completed the blend.

Kanaan Winery Pretty Pony 2013 ** (+)**

Dense black red with purple rim. The nose offers notable concentration and is youthful and largely reserved with muted black and red fruits and a note of creamy oak. This Cabernet-dominated blend is harmonious, full-bodied and balanced. The oak and fruit are skillfully combined, and the wine is refreshed by defining acidity. The Hungarian oak seems to work well. This is a sophisticated example. 14% alc, TA 5.6, pH 3.64. 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot matured 13 months in half French, half Hungarian oak (60% new).

Silver Heights The Summit 2013 ****

Dense very dark red with clear purple rim. The aroma of this youthful blend is warm and concentrated, displaying ripe black fruit and carefully matched French oak. In the mouth, the wine shows noteworthy equilibrium and integration. Full-bodied and warm, with embedded acidity. There is a dry oak imprint in the finale. 14% alc, TA 4.5, pH 4.1 (these are unusual figures – quite low and high, respectively). 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Merlot aged 16 months in 80% new French oak.

Legacy Peak Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot 2012 *+**

Nearly dense dark red. The warm, generous aromatics are characterized by ripe red fruit together with assertive creamy and nutty oak. The wine's taste is ample and full-bodied, quite warm, and exhibits underlying ripe fruit and acidity. The finish imparts a dry, astringent sensation. 14.5% alc, TA 5.7, pH 3.56. 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Merlot aged 19 months in new French oak.