

# WINEMAKING IN SHANGRI-LA

When wine experts think of Chinese wine, the region 'Ningxia' most readily springs to mind. But now Yunnan is emerging. Jim Boyce reports.



The Yunnan region borders Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

PHOTO: MOËT HENNESSY

In a world awash with wine brands, they say that good stories are essential. Yunnan has many: vineyards scattered in the far-flung valleys of a land called Shangri-La. Grape varieties thought extinct, thriving in a vinous Jurassic Park. Bordeaux-style blends with world-beating prospects; ice wines made at latitudes that favour mangoes; exotic concoctions named Rose Honey and French Wild.

Roughly equal to Switzerland in size and Spain in population, Yunnan is China's southwest bulwark. It borders Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. Its terrain spans plateaus, mountain ranges and rivers like the Mekong, Salween and Yangtze. And it produces a wide array of grains, vegetables and fruits along with well-regarded coffee, tea and tobacco.

While it seems an unlikely candidate for premium wine – it lies so far south that the Tropic of Cancer cuts through it – winemaking in the region dates at least to the

latter half of the 19th century, when European missionaries came bearing vines. Although the Ningxia region in the far north dominates the discussion of quality winemaking in China, Yunnan seems poised to make a few statements of its own.

## Old hybrids

The oldest operation here is Yunnan Hong, or Yunnan Red, in Mile County, a two-hour drive south of the provincial capital of Kunming. The site of a pig farm during the 1960s and the tumultuous Cultural Revolution, it was given a new lease on life in 1997 when businessman Wu Kegang established a wine company, partly because his wife hailed from these parts. The sprawling operation, resting at an elevation of about 1,600 metres, makes 5m to 6m bottles annually and is Yunnan's best-known brand.

Its workhorse grapes carry little-known

names like Crystal and Rose Honey, while the premium line is made with French Wild and Yun Zhong Wu, also known as 'Dancing in the Clouds'. Professor Ma Huiqin of China Agricultural University in Beijing, who has consulted here, says these are crosses of *Vitis vinifera* and *Vitis labrusca* made during the 19th-century Phylloxera crisis as protection against the bug, which the missionaries spread through Asia.

Determining the provenance of Yunnan Hong's vines is tricky. It appears that French Wild, for example, came from two separate sources. The first was from expatriate Chinese nationals returning from Vietnam and Indonesia in the 1950s, and the second from a church in the village of Cizhong some 600 km to the north, established by missionaries. "Cizhong represents the roots of Yunnan's wine story," says Yang Huafeng, a winemaker who worked for eight years in that area and is now at Les Champs D'or in

the northwest region of Xinjiang. “The story is the missionaries arrived from Tibet, built the church, and planted French Wild grapes to make wine for their own consumption. When visitors arrive at Cizhong, the farmers are very proud to show their red wines.”

It's an intriguing story - Yunnan Hong even built its own church a few years ago as a tribute - but the real question is how suitable the grapes are for winemaking. Ma notes they tend to make thinner and more acidic wine than you typically get from *Vitis vinifera* varieties and, due to that *labrusca* lineage, have a ‘foxy’ character. “If they intend to sell on quality, I don't think it will be easy,” says Ma. “But if they sell based on the uniqueness of the story, there will be buyers.”

Yunnan Hong appeals in other ways. It is set on rolling grounds surrounded by distant ridges, and relatively close to Kunming, the capital. Visitors here can expect nicely presented Yunnan food with local entertainment to match, a stop at the extensive gift shop, and perhaps even an overnight stay. The brand stresses local themes, including the area's rich ethnic background - roughly half of China's 56 recognised ethnic groups live in Yunnan - and the winery's location, with labels featuring colourful costumes and indicating elevations ('1688'), vineyard age, and the timing of key historical events.

Fine-tuning the wine quality would make the story even better, although that will take time. The climate is fairly warm and humid, as evidenced by a banana plant spotted near the vineyards a few years ago. At that time, general manager Shan Shumin said that the wet season, influenced by monsoons toward the south, overlaps harvest, and that the excessive rain that comes every five years or so leads to widespread disease and low grape sugar. Dozens of varieties have been planted to try and find grapes that will work with the climate, although Shan noted problems with varieties like Cabernet and Merlot and lamented, “we

are like painters without enough colours.”

But while Yunnan Hong and other operations in the south continue to work on quality, there is also wine being produced in the north.

### *The French move in*

“Everything that seems obvious in twenty-first-century life is a challenge,” says Jean-Guillaume Prats, CEO of Estates & Wines for Moët Hennessy. He is in charge of the company's three-year-old joint venture in Deqin County with the VATS Group, a local company. Deqin County is in the mountainous northwest, and VATS has made wine there for about 15 years under its Shangri-La brand. The range includes a ‘plateau series’ that indicates vineyard elevations up to 2,800 metres on its labels. The aim is to make a premium red wine under the label Ao Yun near the town of Shangri-La, close to where Yunnan, Tibet and Sichuan converge. “It's very Bordeaux-like, in terms of temperature, rainfall, and the number of hours of sunshine,” says Prats. “When you look at history, the church and missionaries were pretty good at selecting the right spots, the right soils, for making wine.”

Rainfall is much less of a concern here than it is in the south, but sourcing grapes is harder. Prats gets his fruit from 30 ha of vines in 300 plots at an elevation of 2,400 to 2,600 metres. Nevertheless, he oozes optimism. “The farmers are very much looking at learning the game of producing high-quality products,” he says. “The search for quality, for low yields, for extremely well-managed canopies and vineyards, is not the most pressing concern.”

So what is? Human resources is a major issue given there is lack of quality schools and facilities attractive to skilled employees. Accessibility is



**Yang Huafeng (R), a winemaker with long experience of Yunnan**

another. “The road is a nightmare,” he says. “I was stuck in the snow for three days. Dry goods, corks, equipment, the bottling line, everything you need is a huge logistics issue.” And then there is power - or rather the occasional lack of it. “There's just a line [that carries electricity] along the side of the Mekong River up to the village where we are,” he says. “We need to have our own generator, and we need fuel, and access to that.”

Despite these hardships, the first Cabernet-driven blends, made under the watchful eye of Bordelais Maxence Dulou, have earned praise. UK critic Jancis Robinson MW, who braved the precipitous four-hour drive to Prats's operation in 2014, was enthusiastic. “They are first and foremost mountain wines, with the dense colour and vivid, finely etched flavor that you find in the high-altitude wines of Argentina or even in the best of Spain's Ribera del Duero wines grown at a mere 300m or 400m,” she wrote. “I tasted wines influenced by the pure vineyard characters, fully ripe but well balanced with real, confident, unique personalities of their own.”

### *Wine quality*

David Tyney shudders when he recalls the day of his near plunge. The Australian winemaker was driving down a rough, narrow mountain road with a viticulturalist and an assistant when the car hit a rut, jerked sideways, and ended up partly over a cliff. “I was in the passenger seat, which was hanging over the edge,” says Tyney. “After I climbed out over the other passengers, we dragged the vehicle back on the road and resumed our descent at a much slower speed.”



**“The landscape and climate can change so much because of the elevation and varying soil types. One particular valley might suit Cabernet Sauvignon compared with its neighbor where cooler climate varieties might work.”**

**David Tyney,**  
consultant  
Australian  
winemaker



That road, much like the one that held Prats hostage for three days, underscores the logistical headaches of making wine in the north. “Accessibility to blocks may be difficult and the drive times between vineyards and wineries is long,” says Tyney. “This becomes challenging during harvest when logistics and short drive times are so important.”

Tyney consults on two projects: an ice wine operation with 30 ha of Vidal grapes planted at 2,300 metres and 2,850 metres, not far from Shangri-La, and a slightly lower one with cool-climate grapes like Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. “The landscape and climate can change so much because of the elevation and varying soil types,” he says. “One particular valley might suit Cabernet Sauvignon compared with its neighbour, where cooler-climate varieties might work.”

He notes that Yunnan has a key advantage versus most of northern China, where winemaking is already in full swing. In those other areas, vines must be buried in the autumn to protect them from the cold, dry winters and then uncovered in the spring – two expensive and time-consuming chores that can eat up one-third to one-half of a winery’s budget. Yunnan has no such issues. “That means vineyard establishment is relatively easy and the vine survival rate is higher compared to other regions in the north of China,” says Tyney.

Tyney, who also consults in Ningxia, has been impressed with the wines thus far and notes Yunnan wines have a “lack of greenness” that’s often found in reds from the north. “I’ve been exposed to many different red wines through various stages of the wine-making process and I like the general style and intensity,” he says. And the whites? “They have a wide and complex flavour profile which you’d expect from a cooler-climate region.”

When it comes to white wines, winemaker Yang Huafeng – who spent nearly a decade at Sunspirit, which has vineyards in several parts of the province, and has worked with both vinifera and hybrid grapes – believes that the hybrid Crystal shows potential. “You can produce very interesting dry white wine that is pure, with an intense strawberry aroma and a light body,” he says, adding that he believes it can also be used to produce fine brandy. “In the traditional grape growing regions like Mile, there are a lot of hybrids like Rose Honey and Crystal that were mainly



**Yunnan Hong built a church as a tribute to the 19th century missionaries who brought grapes to this region.**

used as food grapes before Yunnan Hong started to produce,” he explains. “Now, all the wineries located in this region produce wine, grappa or brandy with these two varieties.”

### *Challenges to come*

So far, Yunnan shows plenty of potential. But dealing with poor accessibility and logistics, finding skilled labour, learning which grapes work where, and getting a guaranteed supply of quality fruit all present challenges. Kelly Pearson, who worked the 2013 vintage at VATS’ Shangri-La project for the Wine Network consultancy, found farmers split in terms of their enthusiasm for growing grapes. And plenty of cultural issues with which to contend.

“Defining quality was very sensitive as they all compared each other and wanted to know why one village would get more than another,” she said. “It is a very complex and sensitive issue of how to ensure production quality is managed for the best grapes and wines. Education and support of these farmers is paramount.”

There will also no doubt be concerns about how an expanding wine industry might impact these farmers in the long run, including the

potential for less food self-sufficiency and more dependency on grape buyers, even as standards of living rise. Pearson, who also works as a winery consultant in India, notes they aren’t the only ones facing the stress of change. “One of the things you will find around the world is that winemakers, lab and cellar staff have usually worked not only in other wineries, but also in other regions and, in many cases, in several countries,” she said. “I found it particularly insular at Shangri-La, most likely due to its isolation and the relative young age of the region in regards to wine. Having an open mind to improving production is really important.”

Even so, Pearson, like many other people, sees potential. At the very least, Yunnan looks poised to prove very soon that it can make good wines, even if the terrain suggests it will be in small quantities; Prats expects to produce 2,000 cases at high prices – the word is that these wines will cost \$250.00 each. He will present them in May at Vinexpo in Hong Kong and they will go on sale a month later.

So perhaps the story is that Yunnan will be the country’s niche quality producer against the more general wine sectors of places like Ningxia, Hebei and Shandong. A Grand Cru to their general Bordeaux. ■