What’s on in the Chinese wine industry?

scritto da Fabio Piccoli | 21 Febbraio 2017



You visited Ningxia for the first time. What was your objective for this trip and how was it?

Over these past few years, the Ningxia wine industry development bureau had been inviting me numerous times, and I was finally able to make it happen. It was quite an experience going around wineries and meeting regional officers. The diverse group of producers who are aiming at the highest quality of production struck me with their passion and high quality of wine. My visit was full of surprises that taught me so much about the place, for example how harsh the natural conditions are, how female producers have become the leading figures in pushing the quality higher, and how ambitious the region plans to push the industry forward. This also made me

realize the importance of “being in the terroir” once again.

Can you describe a little more about this wine region?
No one would imagine that in 1000km west of Beijing, right beside the Gobi desert of Central China, there is a vast amount of land lying there dedicated to grape cultivation and winemaking. With millions of dollars of investment pouring in, this is the heart of “the new world of the new world” wines; Ningxia wines. China has always been regarded as a potential wine market, but what we can’t miss now is that it has also become the 5th largest wine producing country in the world, and Ningxia is undoubtedly the most fastest growing area. Ningxia has grown into a wine region with currently over 80 wineries, and many more in development. It’s intention is to plant 67,000 Ha of vineyards, building up to total of 100 estates in the region by the year of 2020. That is a very ambitious plan.

Can you describe more about the female winemakers?
Take Emma Gao, winemaker and owner of the Silver Heights winery. After many years of studying and working in France, she returned to her homeland with few French barrels and tools to pursue winemaking here. With her knowledge she had gained, and using French grapes, her wines scream Bordeaux. Now her high quality French style wines are regarded as the best of Ningxia wines. Now Emma and her French husband are about to introduce a new line of wine that is not too expensive but still high in quality, catering the growing middle class of China.
On the other hand, there is Yuan Yuan from Chateau Zhihui Yuanshi also called Stone Winery. Fresh out of university where she studied tourism, the 24 year old took over the winery from her father with high ambition to incorporate more of the original Chinese, moreover “Ningxia” elements to the winery. Her father has created a winery that looks like an old Chinese castle, and decorated inside with art made by Chinese artists.

How do you see the Chinese market now?

When you look at the consumer's side, the Chinese market is dominated by the perception that imported wine is better. The hype for French wines are still very strong. However, consumers are slowly recognizing and starting to enjoy their own Chinese wine, and this is an important trend that we must keep an eye on. This is because it is only after consumers start to appreciate their local wines, that the doors will open for wines from other parts of the world.

That is why when looking at new markets, it is always important to be up to date not only with the consumer's preference and tendencies but with what is going on the production side. Who are these Chinese wine producers? Where are they making their wines?

Recently Chinese consumers have increasingly become health conscious, and people are being introduced to the health benefits of wine. Female consumption is growing, and they are appreciating the lower alcohol level compared to their traditional drinks such as Baijiu. For example, the uprise of semi-sweet and rose wine production in Ningxia is known as the proof that wine has become tremendously popular among female consumers.

What was the overall impression of your visit?

The Chinese are very good at localizing the wine culture. They do it by simplifying and adapting it to what they already have. For example, at one of the wine exhibition center, we saw rooms named after grape varieties translated completely into Chinese. They are very eager to understand the culture, and then integrate it into theirs.

One thing I've realized was that most of the influences they have is from the French. They regard French wine as the best and are French wine lovers. What ran through my mind was that what if we were able to get them to come to Italy more often? In order to sell more Italian wines in the Chinese market, we need to have more Italian wine lovers. That is why we initiated a wine exchange program with the local wine bureau

which will allow us to deliver quality Italian wines to China and the wines will be promoted together with Ningxia wines.

What should we expect next?
At Vinitaly International, we have a whole plan lined up. Our educational institution will celebrate it’s 3rd year of providing wine education course exclusively on Italian wine and it’s native grapes. This allows wine specialists from all over the world to be able to become an ambassador for the Italian wines in their countries, and we are expecting 15 specialists from China this year. This is an important branch, because we believe that education is crucial. When you look at international credentials, for example 90 percent of the material you have to study for WSET is about French wine, not much about Italian Wine. We would like to have wine lovers all around the world to have a broader view about wine. French are good, but Italian are… more fun!