Winemakers sought for Chinese adventure

13 Jul 2012 by Jancis Robinson

Mountainous Ningxia, 800 km west of Beijing, is looking like the Chinese wine region with the most potential at the moment (see Promising newcomers in China). Yesterday the local government announced an ambitious plan, the Ningxia Wine Challenge. They are looking for 10 foreign winemakers to invite to the region this autumn to make a red and a white wine that will be judged in 2014 and 2013 respectively as part of a competition.

The plan is that participants will select their own grapes, and have the chance to win prizes totalling £20,000/€26,000/$31,000. The aim is to promote cultural exchange and, presumably, help put Ningxia on the international wine map.

Ningxia includes the promising area east of the Helan Mountain range where dozens of wineries now operate, including Helan Qing Xue, responsible for Decanter World Wine Awards trophy winner Jia Bei Lan Dry Red 2009, Emma Gao's Silver Heights and Pernod Ricard's Helan Mountain winery (see these tasting notes).

Cao Kailong, director of the Ningxia's Bureau of Grape and Floriculture Industry, initiated the project and is also hard at work organising the inaugural Helan Mountain Wine Festival at the end of August with associated academic wine conference. Earlier this year, Ningxia became an observer member in the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV) and sent delegates to its conference in Turkey in June. It's all go!

As English-speaking co-ordinator of the Ningxia Wine Challenge Jim Boyce, Beijing-based blogger at Grape Wall of China, told me, 'Things are moving at light speed here and I realise we are going to be criticised by some people for having too short a time frame. But that's how it works here in China - and it usually does work...'

Key features of the Ningxia Wine Challenge:

Ten foreign winemakers will travel to Ningxia on 31 August to participate in the inaugural Helan Mountain Wine Festival and start of the grape harvest. Each winemaker will hand-select grapes from the same vineyard and produce one red wine and one white wine at the same facility. The grape varieties to be used will be revealed after the winemakers arrive in Ningxia (sounds challenging!).

The organisers will cover the cost of transportation and accommodation for each winemaker's initial trip to Ningxia and the costs of up to three return visits. When not in Ningxia, the winemakers may contact assistants there to help with monitoring and other tasks involving the wines.

A panel of foreign and Chinese experts will judge the white wines in September of 2013 and the red wines in September of 2014. The prize for the top wine in each category will be rmb50,000. The prizes for the second and third place wines will be rmb30,000 and rmb10,000 respectively. Two 'honourable mentions' in each category will receive rmb5,000.

Interested winemakers may apply for the programme from 14 July, the deadline being 27 July. A panel of foreign and Chinese judges will decide on the 10 finalists and announce the results by 1 August.

Full details on the application process, as well as the application form, will be posted on the website ningxiawinechallenge.com on 14 July.

Note:
Address English-language queries to Jim Boyce at info@ningxiawinechallenge.com
Address Chinese-language queries to Xue Zhenhua, Bureau of Grape and Floriculture Industry at 19209388@163.com