

Emma Gao - a story of wine today

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What interests me about wine, almost as much as how it tastes and where it comes from, is the host of human stories in every glass. Here is the story of one young female winemaker that nicely illustrates the current evolutionary state of the wine world.

Emma Gao was born and raised in Yinchuan, the capital of [Ningxia](#), a remote and impoverished province in central China. After studying literature, she was somehow able to study economic agriculture at university in what was then Leningrad, where she moved with her father at the end of the Soviet era. Soon after this, her father spent several weeks in France and, in her words, 'he began to appreciate how wine can be a civilising influence'. This led to a family decision to start a winery, almost before the provincial government began its determined transformation of the eastern piedmont of Ningxia's Helan Mountains into China's most exciting centre of wine production, and Emma began her immersion in wine.

For a while she worked for the important distribution business that Spanish wine producer Miguel Torres was far-sighted enough to establish in China many years ago, but most significantly her father insisted that she go to the source to learn about winemaking.

The upshot was that she enrolled in Bordeaux University's wine faculty, qualifying as an oenologist and becoming so proficient in French that she was able to go and work in various quite lofty cellars, including Château Calon-Ségur of St-Estèphe, no less, while it was still run by the rod of iron wielded by the late [Madame Denise Gasqueton](#). The upshot of this was that this young woman from the wilds of China ended up marrying Calon-Ségur's maitre-de-chai, Thierry Courtade, whose father had also run the cellar at Calon.

Although the couple have a seven-year-old daughter, he has only just started living in China and the plan is that he will work for the next two years at the Gao family's Silver Heights winery. (They are pictured, badly, above left.)

It was Silver Heights' Summit bottlings of their first proper vintage 2007, and especially the 2008, tasted on the hoof in Beijing in 2010, that first drew my attention to this high-altitude, reclaimed desert of a wine region. It seemed so much better, more concentrated but gentle in texture, than any other Chinese wine I had tasted before (although [Grace Vineyard](#) of Shanxi province to the east had also impressed me, and they now own vines in Ningxia). Last August I seized the chance to visit Ningxia's wine country, conveniently close to Yinchuan.

One of the highlights was a visit to the Gao family's modest winery. It does not even feature in the glossy brochure that the local government has put together, featuring the well-funded Toytown copies of French châteaux that the Chinese seem to think appropriate designs for wine-producing establishments. This is perhaps not surprising since Silver Heights winery (right) is basically a series of small sheds on the edge of what is very obviously a family allotment in the suburbs of Yinchuan. The kennel, the swing and the sunflowers are all overlooked by nearby apartment blocks, but out of here Emma produces wine magic, red Bordeaux blends that have a distinct winemaking signature even if the Gao family's own vineyard is only 15 ha of mature Carmenère (a local speciality known here as Cabernet Gernischt) and has to be supplemented, as is the usual Ningxia practice, with bought-in grapes.

Her 2009s, made in a lovely ripe vintage, are delicious by any measure but in the rainier subsequent vintages she found herself frustrated by the much poorer quality of the 50% portion of Cabernet Sauvignon they have to buy in. She and her father realised that they had to control their grape supply and they have recently planted a second vineyard. As Emma readily admits, Ningxia's biggest problem is vineyard management. Most vines look thoroughly undisciplined, and the naturally green-tasting Carmenère can be particularly difficult to ripen fully, not least because the farmers and vineyard workers, many of them Muslim, are schooled to value quantity above quality. Or rather, since most wine operations in Ningxia are just a few years old, they have no real conception of wine quality at all.

Ningxia's soils and climate are relatively vine-friendly but, like most wine regions in inland China, there is one big drawback. Winters are so cold that the vines have painstakingly to be individually buried each autumn, in a desperate rush before the big freeze arrives to pick, prune, and irrigate to maximise the sap and ensure the vines are as supple as possible. Emma's father is now 70 so the hard physical work of bending each vine and then standing on it has been done

by Emma and her mother with her father then shovelling the earth on top. It's no wonder that a considerable proportion of Ningxia vines are lost each year as a result of this rather brutal process.

I travel widely around the world of wine but I honestly think that Emma Gao, despite the obvious paucity of financial backing, is the most naturally vivacious wine producer I have ever met. From the minute she came to meet our small group at the smartest hotel in Yinchuan to lead us up several dirt tracks to her tiny winery, I felt I had met her before. As she showed us round her minuscule underground barrel cellar and then served us various samples round a simple table in her yard, she answered all questions frankly and generously with an absence of the usual PR gloss. She switched effortlessly between Mandarin, English and the excellent French in which she communicates with her husband (whose strong Médoc accent seemed particularly out of place in a Yinchuan suburb).

We could tell Austrian glass maker Georg Riedel had been here before us by the number of vast glasses and strangely shaped decanters she produced. Seeing our enthusiasm for her particularly velvety 2009 Emma's Reserve, and knowing that we would all be at an awards dinner that night, she carefully packaged up a decanter full of it in a box that could be taken in to the dinner and discreetly shared it out later to keep us amused during the long speeches. The following morning when we visited her 15-year-old vineyard in the rain (see picture below) at the start of a long day's winery visits, she passed a carton of stemless Riedel glasses into our car 'to be sure you'll always have something decent to taste from.

She later wrote to me (replying so fast to my email that she couldn't possibly have had any help with the English), 'My feeling for winemaking stems in large part from my deep knowledge of the complex geological and social terroir of northern Ningxia, something I carry in my bones. I used the term "social terroir" to refer to Ningxia's ethnically mixed population, but it also applies to the support of business partners and customers who have become close friends. Each year, friends of Silver Heights - both in Ningxia and from all around China - come to help sort and crush grapes, making our wines the work of many human hands but all bound together in a spirit of harmony.'

Excuse me while I go and find a handkerchief.