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French vintner brings grape expectations to China



French renowned vintner Jacques Lurton

Wine has been a part of Chinese culture for centuries, whether of the rice, sorghum or plum variety. The old Chinese saying, "Drinking 1,000 cups of wine would be insufficient when meeting with a true friend," is also symbolic of the role that wine has played in China's past.

However, changing times and closer global integration have led to the clashing of indigenous Chinese wine

culture with the viticulture that introduced decades ago from the many acres of western vineyards. On many of today's chic dinner tables, crystal glasses, corked bottles and decanters have replaced the delicate porcelain wine pots and Chinese miniature wine cups of the past. The wine itself has also changed. Once thick and spicy, it is now generally an acidic, juicy grape beverage, usually dark red or dense white in color.

To some, the gradually and largely unforeseen represents the loss of a part of Chinese culture, where their ancestors would have finished a cup of wine in a mere gulp to show their sincerity. But in line with today's table manners, the speed at which people drink has slowed, allowing time to savor the bouquet of the wine before gradually raising the glass to take a sip.

Renowned French winemaker Jacques Lurton believes that learning about a different drinking etiquette and the various flavors of the different wines is similar to the process of learning a second language. Last month Lurton made his fifth trip to China as he paid a visit to his Chinese partners, Noah Wines (Beijing) Co. Ltd.

Discussing China's new wine culture, Lurton said: "There are lots of things that you don't do because you have never been exposed to them. And when you get exposed to them, at the beginning, it is always a shock."

He continued: "It is like learning a new language. It sounds like something impossible at the beginning. You start to read a little bit, and then read a few words, you can accept more words, and more...then it becomes your second language."

But is grape wine the second language of the Chinese? Some young people clearly think so.

"I like grape wine more than beer and traditional Chinese wines," said 27-year-old Brownie Wang, who is currently working in a public relations firm. "I like its flavor which makes me relax a lot, but I know little about how to discern the qualities of the wines, neither do I know the correct way to drink them."

Sunny Sun, a 26-year-old media employee agrees. She also stated her preference for grape wine over Chinese white wine, while also confessing that she has no idea how to drink it.

Lurton had a simple tip for Chinese wine consumers: Pair your wine with your food. Lurton's belief is that currently, Chinese people see wine as something separate from food, whereas the French, for example, see wine and food as being inextricably linked.

"It is still at an early stage for the Chinese industry to understand about food-pairing," said Lurton. "Because your industry--your food industry or your cooking industry--has never taken [the idea] into consideration that the wine goes with food."

Most young Chinese, despite their understanding of certain grape wine-related rules, such as matching seafood with white wines so as to combine acidity with saltiness, they still need time to adapt to such new customs. What's more, although young people are fascinated by viticulture, they still mostly eat Chinese food.

Lurton said that he knows little about Chinese food; however, he finds the task of pairing Chinese food with grape wines an interesting one, and his Chinese partners have already considered the question of how best to do so.

"We are trying to open a bistro where we plan to explore the pairing between wine and Chinese foods," said Pan Xinglei, president of Noah Wines (Beijing) Co. Ltd. Located at Xihainanyan, literally translated as the "South Bank at the Western Lake", Pan's wine firm is nestled in a well preserved old riverside community in Beijing. A mixture of traditional and fashionable, the block was probably once a quadrangle courtyard and its style is a combination of indigenous flair and modernity.

Pan's wine cellar is a few rooms away from his office. Under the chic wooden storeroom, which features a stunning array of wines, including a "viticulture exploration" restaurant is currently being decorated.

"We want our consumers to understand the glamour of the wines," said Pan, "That's one way in which we can promote viticulture." The restaurant's customers will be able to buy whatever they like, the wines, the glasses or even the olive oil when dining in the restaurant, and Pan guarantees that they will sell at a fair market price.

Pan said that his company dislikes dealing with many of the wine agents in China's chaotic wine market, many of whom import cheap wines and then sell them at a significant markup.

Unsurprisingly, he prefers dealing with small wineries which employ traditional techniques rather than purchasing wines from mass manufacturing bases, despite the latter's lower costs. He hopes that the ensuing quality and credibility of his wines will enable his company to establish a stable, sustained market share.

It is a philosophy which is perfectly aligned to Lurton's. "Xinglei is not in a hurry, he sees the future," said Lurton. "For me, he's an ideal partner, because I come from a country, a culture, where we don't want to appreciate making money right away, we wait for the [right] time, [say, maybe,] 20 years."

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