

Cultivating China's NEW TERROIR

The Yunnan region could become winemaking's next Shangri-La, reports **Mark Ellwood**.

In a rural corner of the Himalayan foothills, deep in the north of China's southwestern Yunnan province, Frenchman Maxence Dulou rules an unlikely fiefdom: a patchwork of vineyards bolted precariously to steep slopes dotted with small villages. So wildly does the terroir vary, Dulou confides, that he had to carve the land into more than 300 distinct portions, each individually mapped and managed. In every lot, fruit-keeping, pruning, irrigation and weeding are customised, with the work conducted by local farmers who tend to the vines by hand. In Yunnan, each acre requires 1,400 hours of labour per year, about four times more than what is bestowed on even the best Bordeaux or Burgundy. "If you wanted to do this in France, people would say, 'You are crazy,'" Dulou says. "But in China, we have the people for it, people who understand the plants."

The product of such painstaking cultivation is Ao Yun, a new wine that Dulou hopes will shatter the perception of Chinese wine among oenophiles. A 90 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon and 10 per cent Cabernet Franc blend, Ao Yun is grown at altitudes up to 8,500 feet – hence its name, which means "roaming above the clouds" – and produced in highly limited quantities: only 24,000 bottles are available worldwide. The first vintage, 2013, was released a year ago, and 2014's has just come to market.

While clearly in command of this ambitious enterprise, Dulou didn't create Ao Yun by himself: from the outset, luxury brand LVMH underwrote the project, which was directed by wine division head Jean-Guillaume Prats. Several years ago, Prats saw clear parallels between rural Yunnan and several of the world's finest winemaking regions. "It's like Bordeaux in terms of weather patterns, and like the remote villages of Spain where people have farmed for generations," Prats noted recently, adding: "The extraordinary landscapes resemble the Uco Valley in Argentina, and the light and blue sky are like Stellenbosch in South Africa."

It was in South Africa, in fact, that Prats first met and was impressed by the Bordeaux-born Dulou, who was then working in one of the country's vineyards. The combination of his experience in France and his ability to translate it on a new continent made Dulou perfectly suited for the task when, after surveying various potential locations across China's Middle Kingdom, Prats took a 50-year lease on this breathtaking area in Yunnan. Making the long-term commitment of leading LVMH's China project, Dulou once again moved continents, along with his Chilean-born wife and two young children.

There were already vines under cultivation in Yunnan's rural heartland, brought there by a French missionary in the late 19th century, but production was small-scale and largely

LVMH's newest prestige wine is grown in the Himalayan foothills.

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COURTESY LVMH

stymied since the Cultural Revolution. Dulou was instantly smitten by this unexpected location – and not just because older vines like these would allow production to ramp up much more rapidly than starting from scratch. “The villages here – Adong, Xidang, Sinong and Shuori – are a patchwork of walnut trees, corn fields, barley and vineyards. Agriculture here hasn’t changed in 100 years, and our ambition was to keep it that way,” he says. The chance to hand-tend the vines was unmissable, as was the opportunity to meticulously compose a wine using grapes from discrete small holdings: with the four villages sitting at different altitudes, their terroirs and levels of sun vary wildly, allowing for much nuance.

Although these possibilities were intertwined with obvious logistical challenges, Dulou was not deterred – on the contrary. The first and largest obstacle lay in the remoteness of the vineyards, a gruelling day’s drive through the mountains from the Yunnan capital of Kunming. Dulou rapidly recognised that Ao Yun’s operation would need to be self-sufficient: if equipment malfunctioned, for example, he and his team needed to fix it themselves rather than wait two weeks or more until a repairman could reach them. Another difficulty resided in the frequency of power outages, which put such processes as bottling at risk if the electricity cut out during operation. After several such incidents, Dulou installed a backup generator as a safeguard and has kept many other processes electricity-free: for instance, de-stemming is done manually, thus avoiding potential mechanical hiccups.

The extremes of weather and climate presented another challenge. The valleys are so steep-sided that they receive restricted hours of sunshine even in midsummer. As a result, grape-picking usually takes place in late October, around 160 days after flowering, as opposed to the typical 120-day turnaround in Bordeaux. But the climate here has unexpected upsides, too: the dry, thin air keeps pests and diseases like botrytis and mildew largely at bay, so farming can be organic and pesticide-free.

Vinification at such altitudes was also groundbreaking, and Dulou tinkered with the process like a mad scientist, exploring how the low levels of oxygen impact yeast, maceration and extraction. Ultimately, Ao Yun’s custom-built cellar was sited in the highest village, Adong, at around 8,500 feet. Housed in a round, earth-walled building, it is intended to blend seamlessly with the existing local architecture.

Ao Yun is not the only premium wine originating in China. Another LVMH subsidiary, Chandon, already produces a champagne-style sparkling wine in the northern region of Ningxia. Several years ago, Italian conglomerate Illva snapped up a sizable share of Changyu, the country’s oldest winemaker, and has since helped the producer upgrade both its technical facilities and its quality. As a result, Changyu’s \$900 million Wine City – a kind of oenophile’s theme park in Yantai – relies on Italian-made machines for production and bottling.

But will such Old World expertise applied to new and existing Chinese winemakers persuade wine lovers worldwide to sample their Cabernets and bubblys? Perhaps Ao Yun will begin to answer this question. Sotheby’s wine expert Nicholas



Jackson seems to think so. “I feel this is the first great Chinese wine. In terms of wine style, a lot of people have said it is like Bordeaux, but I don’t see that,” Jackson says. “I think it has a unique nose and palate, a freshness and saline character that balance the power, and a local herbal streak that comes from that inclusion of 10 per cent Cabernet Franc. Will it sustain? I don’t see why not, given the quality of this first vintage.”

Unsurprisingly, LVMH’s Prats agrees: “Allow me to dream, and I would like it to be like Penfolds Grange,” he says, referring to the famed Australian wine. “An iconic New World wine that is perceived as something unique, with very few counterparts – a benchmark wine that carries a mystique.” That is a lofty aim, but one that Dulou might well achieve. After all, his new region of choice has long been thought of as the seat of the mythical Shangri-La. ■

New York-based Mark Ellwood writes regularly for *Bloomberg*, *Departures* and *WSJ Magazine*.

Ao Yun 2013 and 2014 are available at Sotheby’s Wine Retail in New York (\$295) and Hong Kong (HK\$2,380). Enquiries: New York: +1 212 894 1990; Hong Kong: +852 2886 7888; wine@sothebys.com.

(Above) Ao Yun’s 2013 vintage.
(Opposite) Winemaker Maxence Dulou.