

Chinese Wine Culture & History

China is the sixth largest producer in the world. It has good soil, relatively low labor costs, favorable prices, and a large domestic market.

History:

The history of viticulture and wine in China dates back to 4600 BCE. Vines were planted by the Greeks. Evidence of grape wine, mead (honey wine) and mixtures of alcoholic beverages have been found in contemporary archeological expeditions.

Grape wine died out during the Bronze Age (which began in Greece and China in 3000 BCE) and was replaced by wines made from sorghum, millet, rice, and fruits, such as plums and lychees. By the Han Dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) grape wines had returned, but wine was still precious, and restricted to a small growing area. Grape cultivation eventually died out. By the Tang Dynasty (618 to 907), considered the golden age of culture, and a high point in Chinese civilization, wine was relatively unknown, and grapes and wines had to be reintroduced. Eventually, vines were widespread and grape wines became commonplace and popular. By the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644) grape varieties were listed in a Farming Encyclopedia by Xu Guangqi.

Modern viticulture started around 1892, during the last years of the Qing Dynasty (1644 to 1911) when Zhang Bishi, a Chinese diplomat, started the Zhanyu Winery in Yantai. He introduced good grape species, machinery, and production methods from the west. He also replaced urns with oak barrels as storage containers. This became Changyu Pioneer Wine, the largest in China, on the Shandong Peninsula, south of the Bohai Sea.

In 1949, the Communists nationalized wineries, looking for quantity over quality. Additives were permitted. It took until 2003 for the Chinese government to ban additives, and move towards quality.

After the 1970s, there were more than 100 wineries, and production increased dramatically.

In 1980, the French wine and Cognac producer Rémy Martin started the first joint venture in marketing vinous products for export. This Sino-French joint venture, the Dynasty Winery Corporation, which, combined with the expanded HuaXia Winery and the old Changyu Winery formed the triumvirate of China's wine industry. They are responsible for more than half of the national market within China, and also has a significant share in the international market.

As the local Chinese population became wealthier, by 2005 most of the Chinese wines that were produced were consumed locally. Also in 2005, with the creation of the China Fine Wines, LLC, the market for premium, grape-based wines was increased. Further, international wines were imported into China, and a network of wholesalers, distributors, and retailers was established. Red wines, associated with good luck, now have 80% of production, with whites the remaining 20%. China now has over 400 wineries growing grapes on 100,000 acres.

Founded in 1988, the HuaXia Winery, located in the Hebei Province, has become the third largest producer of wine in China. It is a division of COFCO, a giant Chinese foodstuffs corporation. Its two brands are Changli and Great Wall. The vineyards are mostly in the Shandong Province. They produce wines that are dry, sweet, fortified, sparkling and distilled, and have a large export business.

There are many innovative wineries in the western part of Inner Mongolia around Wuhai, in the north Helan Shan Mountains of Ningxai and the Yellow River Valley. One of these wineries, **Dragon's Hollow**, produces wines exclusively for export, mostly to the United States, and its wines comply with all international regulatory agencies.

The climate in this region is hot and dry with a long frost-free period. The sun is strong, but diurnal swings produce cool nights. Even though the wineries are located near deserts, there is water for irrigation. Since there are no insects, diseases, chemicals or pollution, organic growing is also possible.



Geography:

The main wine regions cut across the northcentral section of China, starting around **Wuhai** in the southern section of the autonomous Inner Mongolia province. Just south of Wuhai, in the Helan Shan Mountains, grapes are growing in the **Ningxia** autonomous region, around the city of Yinchuan, along the Yellow River. Traveling east, grapes are growing around **Taiyuan**, the largest city in Shanxi province, and along the Yellow River valleys as the river runs south into the Henan province, before it again makes a turn to the northeast, where it empties into the Bohai Sea. Just north of the river, there are vineyards located in the northern Hebei

province, principally in the large municipalities of **Beijing** and **Tianjin**. Finally, the largest wine region in China, with over 140 wineries, lies in the northern Shandong province situated in the peninsula along the southern shore of the Bohai Sea, where **Yantai-Penglai** (the Water City) is situated.

Other important wine regions are located in northeastern Jilin province around **Tonghua**, the **Yibin** region in the northeastern part of Yunnan province, and a large area in the western Xinjiang province.

Wine regions

Beijing and **Tianjin** are on the tip of the North China plain. Mountains to the north and northwest shield North China's agricultural heartland from the desert in Hebei's northern region. Summers are hot and winters are cold. Too much rain in certain years often leads to problems with disease.

Yibin, in Yunnan province, has high humidity the year round. Summers are long and hot with rains, and winter is mild.

Tonghua, in the northeast Jilin province, has hot, humid summers from east Asian monsoons, and long, cold dry winters. This area grows mostly local grape species, since *Vitis vinifera* cannot survive the winters here.

Taiyuan, in the Shanxi province, is semi-arid, with dry springs, dust storms, early summer heat waves with rain in July and August. Winters are long and cold, but are dry and sunny.

Ningxia is in northcentral China on the Loess Plateau. It is mostly desert, but the land along the Yellow River in the north has been irrigated. This land reclamation, with its irrigation projects, has made grape and other fruit cultivation possible.

Yantai-Pengli is in the northern part of the Jiaodong Peninsula on the Bohai Sea. It is a very scenic tourist area. Agricultural products include grapes, apples, peaches, pears, cherries, ginkoes and chestnuts. There are large diurnal swings with very hot days and very cool nights. Over 40% of Chinese wine is grown and made here.

Xinjiang, the largest autonomous region, borders on Russia, Mongolia, India and "*The 5 'stans' of Middle Asia*": (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan). The region is known for fruits, such as grapes, melons, pears and other agricultural products. Extremely cold winters and hot, dry summers, reduce the number of varieties of grapes that can be grown.

Grape varieties and wines:

Contemporary wines are patterned after the French, and not traditional styles. Varieties include Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Merlot, and Chardonnay, which are often produced with modern equipment, and aged in French oak.

The Dynasty Winery, in Tinjian, described above, makes wines from the above red and white varieties, plus the red Carignan, and the whites Muscat and Italian Riesling. It is purported to be the second largest producer of wines in China.

Bingxueli is a sweet white wine, fermented from dried grapes, and also aged in French oak.

Grapes are used for wine, table grapes and raisins, and also medicine. In addition to grapes, sweet fruit wines are made from plums and lychees.

Shaohxing, from the province of Zhejiang, is a wine made from rice, and has the flavor of dry Sherry. Besides being a beverage, it is also used as a cooking ingredient. It is in the category of 'yellow liquors.' (*huangjiu*). Also in that category is Hua Tian, a wine made from glutinous rice and the mineral-rich water of Lake Jian. Styles can range from dry to sweet, and can reach anywhere from 15% to 20% alcohol. China has no regulations against wines being made from ingredients other than grapes.

Attitudes today:

With China's greater affluence, expensive wines are the most sought after. Wine is identified with status, whether for consumption, entertaining or gift giving.