

The New York Times

Sunday Review | OPINION

China's New Obsession: French Wine

By WILSON T. VORNDICKJAN, 25, 2014



“The Drops of God,” a Japanese manga series, translated into Chinese, led to a surge of Asian interest in Château le Puy vintage red wine from Bordeaux. Regis Duvignau/Reuters

BORDEAUX, France — WHEN the Bordeaux International Wine Institute, which offers business management training in the oenological arts, opened its doors in 2004, it had 20 students, mostly from domestic French wineries. Today it has 105.

What is most striking about this year's class isn't its size, but its composition. Though students come from places as diverse as India and Turkey, one group of foreigners stands out: Chinese students make up almost 30 percent, the largest group by nationality behind the French. Their American classmates comprise less than 4 percent.

Meanwhile, the Burgundy Business School in Dijon has also recorded a

rise in Chinese students in its wine management programs. Between 2009 and 2012, Chinese students made up barely 10 percent of the graduate ranks; now, 33 of this year's 100 students hail from China.

Wine has always been an essential part of the French tradition, both culturally and economically, but the world's growing middle class has made it a global one: worldwide wine consumption is expected to grow almost 9 percent, to \$182 billion, by 2016, with a large chunk of the demand coming from China.

Some in France, however, view this development with unease, which has at times exploded into violent xenophobia. In August a group of Frenchmen assaulted a group of Chinese oenology students at a wine school in nearby Sauternes, sending several to the hospital.

Along with a general fear of change within the centuries-old wine world, there is concern that China, with its huge population and geography, could someday eclipse France's place in wine production. Some even fear that these students could mark the first stage of a Chinese takeover of the French wine industry, buying up vineyards in the same way the country bought up huge tracts of Africa.

Such concerns are misplaced. Not only does the explosion in China's interest in wine bode well for the French economy, but the connections built between French vintners and their Chinese students will pay enormous cultural dividends for both countries.

Most people are surprised to learn that China already has a strong winemaking tradition. Indeed, many of the students at the French schools are working at the graduate level, having already completed undergraduate courses in oenology back home.

One student in Bordeaux, Zhang Xuan, began his wine studies in one of the new oenology programs at China's Northwest University of Agriculture and Forestry, in the central Chinese city of Yangling, and later interned with a Chinese winery before coming to France.

Others grew up working on their family's vineyards, or selling wine at a family-owned shop.

Whatever their background, most of them plan to return to China after their studies — and to take their new, French-inflected skills with them. Another Bordeaux student, Wu Zhaolong, discovered his passion for

wine while working in the hotel and restaurant industry in Shanghai. He plans to go into restaurant management, integrating French food and wine styles with traditional Shanghainese dining.

As they move on, they will take along a respect for French culture, which they will later share with their co-workers and customers, in much the same way that the French winemaking know-how imported to California in the 1950s and '60s helped initiate a new wave of interest in French cuisine and culture nationwide.

At the same time, these students will build strong binational business relationships: Zhu Qiyao, who ran a wine sales company in Hangzhou before coming to Bordeaux, wants to perfect her wine-negotiation skills and expand her business network before returning to China.

But the real benefit for France, and one that these students will help strengthen, is economic. French wine already accounts for 48 percent of Chinese wine imports, and Bordeaux's reds are a particular favorite of the Chinese elite.

And the Chinese market can only grow. A report presented last summer at Bordeaux's enormous VinExpo predicted that Chinese wine consumption would grow 40 percent from 2012 to 2016. And Chinese drinkers don't want plonk: While China ranks only 20th in per capita wine consumption, it ranks fourth in terms of the value of the wine it consumes.

A good bit of this demand will be met domestically, of course: China is already the fifth-largest wine-producing nation, and France's Center for Scientific Research recently predicted that it would double its production in five years.

Some in France fear that China's growing love of wine will drive wealthy Chinese investors to gobble up French vineyards. Chinese have been snatching up Bordeaux chateaus at roughly one a month. Last year a Chinese industrialist raised alarms in Bordeaux after buying a top-class, or grand cru, wine producer, Château Bellefont-Belcier.

But such concerns are overblown. With upward of 8,000 properties, there are still plenty of French-owned vineyards. And there has been plenty of investment in the other direction.

In the last few years, many renowned French wine companies have

rushed to open joint-venture vineyards and wineries in China. In July, Moët Hennessy's Chandon subsidiary opened its Ningxia Winery in central China, which will be dedicated to producing sparkling wine. Not far away, Pernod Ricard, a renowned wine producer, recently took over another large winery, Helan Mountain.

Globalization is reshaping every industry, even one as hidebound as French wine. But its partisans should be more optimistic. Far from destroying French wine traditions, forces of globalization, even one as large and powerful as China, can only help them.

And in any case, at least some in Bordeaux are keeping their prejudices closer to home. As one leading vintner said wryly, "I don't care who buys these chateaus, as long as they are not from Paris."