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How China's varietal range has been shaped by history and climate

Development of the Ningxia wine industry implies overcoming several obstacles and gaining a better understanding of the most suitable grape varieties and vineyard management techniques for the region. Junxiang Zhang outlined the current challenges, possible remedies and the outcome of recent research.

The first quality grape varieties were introduced into China in 1892, but prior to international grapes dominating the Chinese wine arena as they do today, there would be several phases of development. These are marked as much by adaptation to natural conditions in the country as they are by politics. Both lecturer and president of the College of Enology, Northwest A&F University, Yulin Fang outlined the changing faces of Chinese wine growing, starting with the historic 'Dragon Eye' grape which has long been grown in Chinese vineyards. It was followed by Muscat Hamburg, then Beichun, a cross between Muscat Hamburg and Amurensis produced by Chinese researchers to survive the cold winters. The Soviet era would also leave its mark

on the country's vinous history, introducing varieties such as Tchervien Muscat and Rkatsiteli. More vine varieties would be introduced from abroad in the 1970s followed by a period of French influence during the 1990s when France's viticultural experts travelled to China to share their knowledge with local viticulturalists. The present-day make-up of the country's wine grape varietal range reflects international input, with 60% of the vines Cabernet-Sauvignon.

A more rational distribution of vineyards

In 2016, China had 847,000 hectares under vine, but just 12% of this is actually dedicated to wine grapes; most of

the vines are for table grapes with a small balance for raisins. The 100,000 hectares or so planted to wine grapes offer an unusual mixture of varieties, revealing how growers have sought to ramp up the percentage of quality international cultivars, whilst promoting varieties that have adapted or been adapted to suit local growing conditions, particularly the cold, but also different soil types. After Cabernet-Sauvignon (80,623 ha) comes Merlot (16,694 ha) then Cabernet-Gernischt (11,240 ha), Chardonnay (6,118 ha), Yan 73 (4,778 ha), Riesling (1,581 ha), BeiBingHong (1,573 ha), Ugni blanc (1,504 ha), Syrah (987 ha), Cabernet Franc (625 ha) and Pinot noir (433 ha). On a much smaller scale, varieties such as Vidal, Riesling, Italian Riesling, Cinsault, Grenache, Gamay, Chenin Blanc, Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and Gewurztraminer can also be found.



Strangely enough, no mention is made of Marselan, despite the seeming significance of the variety in some regions such as Ningxia. In terms of geographical distribution, China's wine grape vineyards are concentrated in several major regions: the North-East, where *Vitis amurensis* Rupr is often found due to temperatures which can plummet to $-30/40^{\circ}\text{C}$ in the winter; the North-West, which is arid; the Yellow Plateau, home to regions such as Ningxia; the South-West; the South; the mid and lower reaches of the Yellow River; and the Bohai Straits.

"The geographical distribution of wine regions has become more rational", said Yulin Fang, attributing the rationalisation process to the strong development of wine production over the past three decades. Though much more concentrated than vineyards for producing table grapes, which span the country, more than half of China's provinces now make wine. Each of them has developed its own varietal range and specific canopy management techniques, including the use of pergola systems. Differentiation, however, will likely only come when China's reliance on Cabernet-Sauvignon gives way to a less standardised varietal range.

