

# Conference N°7



## How Ningxia can learn from success stories, and failures, in its choice of varietal range

With any wine industry in the early stages of development, the choice of varietal range is vital, not only for obtaining convincing results in the vineyard, but also from a marketing perspective. Master of Wine Sarah Jane Evans looked at possible options open to Ningxia, and outlined the pitfalls and advantages of choosing one option over another.

“There are three options: the classical option; local varieties and creating something new”, claimed Sarah Jane Evans. There are examples of all three worldwide, some highly successful, others less so. In the first category, Australia’s Coonawarra, America’s Napa Valley, Chile’s Aconcagua, Alto Maipo and Alto Cachapoal and Italy’s Tuscany have been successful in going down the classic Bordeaux route. South Africa, New Zealand, South America in general, Spain and China have chosen a similar tack, but have yet to achieve the same level of recognition – “it is still a work in progress”. Pinot noir has also been adopted successfully in regions like Oregon, Sonoma, Martinborough and Central Otago, whereas in Leyda and San Antonio in Chile,

Germany, South Africa and cool climate Australia, the process is still ongoing. In fact, the world of wine is littered with examples of success and failure stemming from the right, or wrong, choice of varieties. “Originality does not always pave the way for success”, commented Evans, citing South Africa with Pinotage. “It was one of South Africa’s earliest signature varieties but it has been marred by major problems: it has not been universally popular in terms of style and has caused winemaking issues”.

### Numerous aspects to consider

Other examples of misguided choices include Rioja neighbour Navarra, where a long history and rich heritage

linked to Garnacha was sacrificed on the altar of international varieties in the 1970s. Still struggling to find its identity, Navarra's future according to Evans is Garnacha supported by terroir. Carménère in Chile, which seemed like the ultimate flagship varietal, "has never lived up to expectations", unlike New Zealand and Sauvignon blanc, the "textbook signature varietal". The example of Argentina and Malbec shows how wine producers can evolve, in this case to lighter, fresher and lower alcohol offerings, to become the go-to wine in, say, the United Kingdom, with increased focus on terroir issues.

"These producers are not standing still but constantly moving forward", pointed out Evans, who also identified problems such as bottlenecks in the market caused by producers over-enthusiastically embracing certain wine styles, like English sparkling wines. "Certain regions have been slow to identify the right grape varieties", noted Evans, whilst others, like Armenia, have realised that their future lies not only in their chosen varietal range but also in promotion of ancient winemaking techniques and aids like amphorae. Of all the examples available to Ningxia wine producers, perhaps Marselan has the best potential to become the region's flagship grape. "It offers very different profiles worldwide, but as a little known grape variety it requires a clear message – is it a crossing or a hybrid, for instance". Whilst believing that "there is an opportunity to take ownership of this grape variety", Evans also advocates diversity: "Different Chinese culinary styles are recognised abroad. Why could this not be replicated for wine?" It's certainly food for thought.



## Interview

*Q1 : Wines and tourism in many regions are inseparable, places such as La Rioja, Napa and Barrosa Valley are not only known as successful wine producing regions but also regarded as must-visit destinations for wine aficionados and regular tourists alike. However, wine tourism still needs much development in China for multiple reasons such as lack of collaboration among wineries. What is your advice for promoting wine culture and regional economies through wine tourism in China?*

**SJ E:** I speak from my experience of wine tourism in Europe, and in north and south America, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. Wine tourism at its best can obviously make a very positive contribution to the winery, but also to the local economy. Visitors will be encouraged to visit the region, and they will have a reason to spend longer there. Each winery needs to develop its own offer and to tell a different story. One winery may have a very good programme for children, another may offer food and wine matching at its restaurant, another may have a strong commitment to education about vine growing and wine making, yet another may become known for musical events. Thus, by working together in a single regional promotion, the different wineries

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## Interview

make a very attractive, diverse offer to visitors and can teach them about the safe and sensible enjoyment of wine. Local tourism needs to be involved to ensure that there are adequate hotels and places to stay. Wineries are one part of a regional tourism package that may include leisure activities in the countryside, or visiting historical sites. In a number of countries 'Wine Routes' linking local wineries have proved successful, and can be used in international marketing.

Finally, every winery must be committed to a programme that educates visitors about drinking alcohol in moderation, and the safe consumption of alcohol.

*Q2: Many wineries are producing biodynamic wines and some question if biodynamically growing grapes and wines thereafter are better reflections of terroir. What is your opinion on this phenomenon and do you think this value will be adopted by winegrowers in China?*

**SJE:** Biodynamics is the practice of working introduced by Rudolf Steiner. Whether it reflects the terroir better is debated, and there are many who are very strongly in favour. What is certain is that a producer working with biodynamics, or growing grapes organically, has to pay a great deal of attention to the vineyard. Rather than simply applying chemical treatments to the vine according to a calendar, this way of working requires the producer to be more focused on the health of the individual plant. It does not work in every environment. It's particularly difficult in places of high humidity and high rainfall, for instance.

Every producer needs to think about the health of the people working in the vineyard. A biodynamically managed vineyard may be better for the health of the vineyard workers. Furthermore, it's important for producers to look ahead. As consumers become more interested in their health, and the environment, and sustainability, then there may be an increasing demand for wines from biodynamically or organically grown grapes. Producers who are working this way already will have an advantage.

*Q3: Some believe that the current grape varieties being grown in China are highly homogeneous and lack diversity. In your opinion, are there any lesser-known grape varieties which you believe might perform well in China, particularly in the areas of Ningxia and Shandong regions?*

**SJE:** I am not yet familiar with the soils and climate, the terroir, of Ningxia and Shandong so cannot comment on this. What I would say is that these regions should focus on producing the best wines they can from their soils. This will inevitably involve continued experimentation over time. There is no requirement to use famous international varieties. The best wines may come from something lesser-known that is better adapted to the environment. It will be an opportunity for Ningxia and Shandong to show that they have something different to offer.

