

12/15

Stepping out of my comfort zone and into the world of Chinese wine

In the Napa Valley you're always a stones throw away from a good wine (most likely a cab). Granted, some are better than others but after decades of trial and error the NV has got it down. This valley has put itself in a box; a delicious box but a box none the less. I'm not saying that's even a bad thing, we know what works here and how to make a wine from this region really shine. When you taste wines here you have a general idea of what to expect from the quality level to the taste profile.



Now, how about let's step out of our NV box. When was the last time you tried a Chinese wine?

Chinese wine you ask? Yes, Chinese wine. When some of you read that you may have scoffed, chuckled, or smirked with amusement. When Bryan Cheeseborough invited Phil and me to judge a flight of Chinese wines I had a moment of assuming belittlement, if I'm being honest, but then I thought the better of it and quickly agreed. We often forget that it was not that long ago when the world looked at California wines with the same dismissiveness till one Chardonnay in a Paris tasting made everyone think twice.

On a cloudy Friday in December Phil and I with 4 other judges commandeered a room in the back of Laird and tasted a flight of 18 wines, 4 whites and 14 reds, from different regions in China. Most of the wines were from Ningxia, or the Napa Valley of China as it is sometimes referred to as. This region of China is expanding at an astonishing rate with 80,000 acres planted now but by 2020 they plan to have more than 160,000 (China, 2016).



We started with the whites.

The 3 chardonnays we're a bit lackluster when it came to aroma and the 1 viognier had an off character giving the wine a skunky smell. None of the whites were exceptional but they had promise. The favorite white was the chardonnay from Yin Guang Xia. It had a light aroma with a sweetness reminiscent of syrupy pineapple but the herbal notes balanced it out.

The reds were a mix of blends, merlot, but mostly cab. They varied from congenial to unfavorable. The better reds had intriguing aromas; sandalwood, cherry, pepper, leather with notes of cocoa, cedar, and all-spice. Quite a few of the reds had that fermented sweet quality that always make me think of the fruit leathers mom packed in your lunch as a kid and is not a quality I look for in my wines. Some were very hot and tasted like black pepper with a side of some more black pepper making it was hard to decipher any other flavor characteristics.

The hands down favorite of the group was Legacy Peak - 2012 "Family Heritage" red blend. The aroma was dusty leather with undertones of dried cherries. These notes carried into the pallet incorporating tart red fruits, cranberries and pomegranates, in the front but rounding out with a sweeter dried strawberry on the back.

None of the wines I tried are my new favorites but it was so much fun to step out of my comfort zone for a couple hours. You walk into a tasting room anywhere in the Napa Valley and you know what you're getting. There's something kind of exhilarating to have a wine sitting in front of you with no idea what to expect.

Bryan Cheeseborough, who is the resident expert on Chinese wines, said that comparing Chinese wines 10 years ago to what they're producing now it's like night and day. They've come far in a reasonably short period of time. So maybe next time someone asks you when the last time you tried a Chinese wine it might not be such an unreasonable question.



"China makes big bet on turning desert into wine region". CBS News. January 16, 2016.
<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-aims-become-top-wine-producer-ningxia-region-vineyards/>

