

Extremely rapid growth in China's vineyard acreage has taken the global wine industry by surprise in recent years. However, according to Professor **Demei Li**, associate professor of wine tasting and oenology at the Beijing Agricultural College, China is first and foremost a consumer country offering huge potential for exporters, provided they take a sensitive approach to the market.

Climatic restrictions make wine growing challenging and expensive in China and domestic producers have struggled to compete with foreign imports at entry and mid-level. 2015 saw a spike in bulk wine imports, which are used to offset a drop in national production, bearing out Professor Li's statement. He claimed that small

growers in particular are uprooting vineyards due to issues with cost and quality and that the future for China's wine producers lies either in large brands or high-end boutique offerings. This bodes well for imports which, after a slow-down in 2012, 2013 and 2014 due to austerity measures, have returned to growth.

France proved to be quick on the uptake from the outset and has carved out a sizeable 45% chunk of total imports due to extensive groundwork in promotion, mainly through its regional marketing boards. Australia has also benefited from effective promotion and advantageous trading conditions and boasts the highest average price at nearly \$6 a litre, after low-volume New Zealand.

The pitfalls of taking a blanket approach to China

Countries like Australia have shown awareness of issues affecting consumer trends in China. These include major regional differences across the country – in terms of food, religion and social activities for example – making national coverage impossible. Linguistic issues are also involved, making it essential to choose the right interpreter and a Chinese brand name.

From a food perspective, salient flavour profiles dictate style preferences and there is no such thing as a unified Chinese palate: the North is more geared to salty foods, the North-West to spicy dishes, the South prefers even spicier foods and the South-East sweet, whilst the coastal areas, predictably, opt for seafood.

Food and wine pairings are made extremely challenging by the diversified nature of Chinese meals, hence explaining the popularity of beer, water and white spirits. External factors such as price, packaging, region, variety/style and taste are also of paramount importance and style

descriptors on packaging – for example dry red wine – are an important way of reaching out to consumers. As an aside, Professor Li debunks the myth that the Chinese prefer sweet wines, explaining that the misconception stems from the fact that they understand sweet but not tannins and texture, hence the success of light and fruity Chilean wines.

Probably one of the most important lessons to be learnt is that European standards cannot be transposed to China, although the appeal of genuine quality is a common denominator. Professor Li stressed that history and technical details are meaningless to the Chinese but that authenticity is essential; bespoke products specifically targeting the Chinese are doomed to failure because they imply lower standards. But perhaps one of the most important rules to remember is that foreign exporters are not competing with local wine producers, but with home-grown drinks such as baijiu.