

# DO NATIVE GRAPE VARIETIES HOLD THE KEY TO THE FUTURE OF THE CHINESE WINE INDUSTRY?

CONFERENCES

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The obvious choice for a nascent modern wine industry is to opt for the play-safe, internationally renowned grape varieties, particularly in a country where wine knowledge is also in its infancy. But as consumer tastes mature and greater international presence is secured, native cultivars can become a worthwhile USP. **Jicheng Zhan**, a professor at the China Agriculture University, described some of the local grape varieties available to the country's wine industry.

China could outdo many better known producer countries when it comes to the length of its viticultural history. The earliest known Chinese grape wine dates from the Neolithic era, discovered at the Jiahu site in Henan Province. The domestication of vines in China began in around 1046-256 BCE. During the Han Dynasty, *vitis vinifera* was introduced to China from

central Asia in Shaanxi Province, near modern-day Xi'an. Despite and throughout this long-standing history, the Chinese never developed a strong taste for grape wine, however, and the first modern winery would not open until 1892: Changyu, in Shandong Province. In recent years, China has been making up for lost time and from 2000 to 2014 was one of only a few countries in the world to increase wine production. The percentage of grapes grown for wine, compared with total acreage, remains minimal, intimating that further growth is likely in the future. Currently, the most popular red varietal is Cabernet-Sauvignon and the most common white is Chardonnay. More than 80% of all wine produced is red. But as the industry and drinking habits in China evolve, its varietal range will probably go down the same route, diversifying and broadening in scope.

## Native grapes, wild grapes and hybrids

One obvious way of making a domestic wine industry more interesting and unique is by using native grapes. They can provide a competitive edge as no comparisons can be drawn with other countries. They also often offer greater resistance to disease and are, logically, more suited to the local climate and soils.

China has several unique varieties of grapes grown for wine production. These include several hybrid grapes that are crosses between Chinese and European or American grapes first brought to China by Western missionaries. Approximately 39 wild grape strains also exist in China, some of which have been bred in other countries. Names such as Longyan or Dragon's Eye, Shuanghong, Beihong, Beimei, Beibinghong and Gongzhubai, all of which were presented in the tasting hosted by Jicheng Zhan, may not yet be familiar to wine drinkers around the world, but they may rise to prominence in the future. The country also

grows the Kyoho grape, primarily for food but also sometimes used to make wine in China. The Hutai grape is used to make ice wine in Shaanxi Province. Harsh weather in the winter in the northern part of the country – where vines have to be buried in the winter – and issues with disease in other regions are likely to encourage Chinese researchers to study the potential of native grape varieties for the future of the industry.

