

» By Jan Nary

Organic trade with China

The new silk road

China is a rapidly-growing, energetic and increasingly affluent society and Tamburlaine Winery's Mark Davidson, one of Australia's largest organic wine producers, reflects on his experiences in the Chinese market so far.

"Grape wine is an integral part of Chinese culture – while their local wines haven't yet registered on the Richter Scale, China has its own grape varieties as well as using the classic European wine grapes," he says.

There are recorded times in China's history where some of the aristocratic houses indulged in wine-drinking and feasting to a level reminiscent of ancient Rome. Mark says in today's China other than in Muslim communities, there are no social barriers to alcohol consumption.

"Business lunches and celebrations almost invariably involve large quantities of various alcoholic beverages which more and more consist of wine. There is still a practice of drinking large amounts of cheap wine mixed with soda but as Chinese people travel more and lift their expectations, as more global ex-pats take up residence in China and the people become more affluent, there is a growing tendency to seek out top-end wines," he says. "White-tablecloth dining' and western food restaurants are on the increase in Beijing and Shanghai, offering a good international choice of wine. China is eager to take on those things that are a definition of international success."

Mark says that in a country that prides itself on the variety and delicacy of its regional foods, the national palate is well-prepared to savour the subtleties of good wine. He describes traditional tea drinking, from the green through to the aged dark styles, as being regarded similarly to the appreciation of wine in our culture. Tea has similar tannin sensations to those experienced with wines.

"On top of this, Chinese medicine, much like the medications of western apothecaries, is based on natural products – honey, herbal extracts and bark – which puts red wine, with its high levels of resveratrol antioxidants, in a strong position. For this reason white wine has been slow to get a look in."

Four years ago Mark was invited by an Australian-Chinese local to open an Australian wine bar in southern China and



Mark Davidson, Tamburlaine Winery, finds more and more Chinese are succumbing to the taste of Australian organic wine.

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his exports have grown steadily since then, despite the high costs of entry to Chinese markets. He has now extended his interests there to include growing and fermenting a local wine in NE China and the second vintage is due soon.

Mark says that he is gradually bringing organic farming to his vineyard operation and this is philosophically appealing to Chinese winegrowers but they have been sold on chemical farming. He is also combating the regularly expressed idea that Australian vines are inherently different to Chinese ones.

"China was isolated for a long time which has made its people staunchly nationalistic. Even with my thirty years in winegrowing it takes a lot of time and patience for me, as an 'outsider', to get the message across and to establish 'street cred' there," he says.

Tamburlaine products are sold in the

provinces Fujian, Guangdong and Hainan; Mark's next major step is to explore northern China/ Beijing markets.

"There are four cities in China, each with populations in excess of twenty million, one of them being the capital, Beijing," he says. "At present there is an opportunity with a group in Beijing who want to specialise in quality Australian products. I'll be taking the organic message to them next visit."

"Over the years I've built close personal relationships with the customers I work with in many markets around the world, and this is no more important anywhere else than in China. Written contracts are still necessary but really quite "rubbery" in the minds of the Chinese. Legal protections, while improving, are scant. So, doing deals where everybody walks away happy and where trust builds over time is the only way forward. The trick is, as with everything, choosing your friends." <<<