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In China's Outback: Australian Lillian Carter on making wine in Xinjiang

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A serene setting for Wang Zhong winery

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By Jim Boyce

This fall, **Lillian Carter** started her second China adventure when she headed to **Xinjiang** winery **Wang Zhong**, a six-hour drive south of capital city **Urumqi**, and followed up on the vintages she did at **Pernod Ricard** winery **Helan Mountain** in **Ningxia** in 2008 and 2009. Carter, who has worked at **Oakridge Wines** and at **Domaine Chandon**, both in the Yarra Valley, and at **Orlando Wines** in the **Barossa Valley**, answered a few questions about her new post.

*This new project is in the **equivalent** of **Australia's outback**. Where exactly is it? How do you get there?*

Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region translates to 'new frontier'. It's an enormous and diverse region covering around **one-sixth** of **China's land mass** and is a **melting pot of cultures**. The winery is in **Yanqi County** around 60 kilometers to the north of **Kuerle**, a city of half a million people an **hour's flight** southwest of the capital, **Urumqi**. From **Melbourne** it can take up to **four airport transits**



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and **two days** to arrive. It's remoteness means it has a special kind of **rugged beauty**, but it's quite different to Australia's outback.

How hard was it to make the decision to go to Xinjiang? What were the key reasons you decided to do it?

It wasn't difficult at all. I have been interested in coming back to China since working for Pernod Ricard on the **Helan Mountain project** in Ningxia in 2008 and 2009. The Wang Zhong project is particularly exciting as it's a **completely new winery** with **owner-operated vineyards** and **Professor Li Demei** as lead consultant.

What are your duties at the winery?

Daily vintage duties include tasting **ferments** in the morning and evening to determine the work schedule: things like red cap management and temperature regimes, pressing, racking, inoculations, and so on. I need to make sure everything happens **logically** and **efficiently**, which is more difficult than it sounds when an **interpreter** is involved in the communication process. Outside of vintage we are working on quite a few projects, such as establishing **systems and processes**, commissioning the **bottling line** and other new equipment, **training** and building up a strong team, implementing **safety protocols** — there is a lot to do before the 2013 harvest.

What grape varieties are planted? How well are they faring?

The vineyard has been planted in stages to **Cabernet Sauvignon**, **Merlot**, **Cabernet Franc** and **Chardonnay** as well as smaller blocks of some interesting varieties. It's the first harvest of **three-year-old vines** so a little too early to make comparisons. I'm particularly excited about the patch of **Shiraz** that was planted in **2011** and might be ready to harvest next year. I'll keep you posted.

*This has been a **tough year**, in terms of weather, for **Ningxia** and **Shandong** and some other wine regions around the world. How has it been in Xinjiang? When did you start **harvest**?*

It was **warm** and **dry** out here. In fact, the region has such **low disease pressure** that the viticulture practices are **inherently organic**, which means fungicides, pesticides and herbicides are not used. **Chardonnay** was harvested in the **third week** of **August** and **Cabernet Sauvignon** at the **very end of August**. It's always **tricky** to **quote yield** as this parameter is greatly affected by planting

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density and trellis design. The **yield** was **restricted early in the season** through **bunch thinning** that made sure the vines were balanced. Ultimately this is the most important parameter.

Given your experiences in Ningxia, what similarities and differences did you see in respect to Xinjiang when it comes to climate, soil, vineyard and winery skills, quality of the vineyards, and so on?

Like Ningxia, we also **need to bury the vines** for the **winter** but the growing season is **much drier** in southern Xinjiang. The soil is **very sandy** but I'd say **Ningxia** has a **greater silt content** owing to the **Yellow River**. The soils at the **Wang Zhong** winery are **extremely rocky** with a **high pH**. Water is drawn from underground and a **drip irrigation** is used which is great as it gives much better control than traditional flood irrigation methods. The region is enthusiastically embracing the wine industry and doing a good job of **attracting skilled workers**.

Speaking of Ningxia, in August you joined a tasting of 39 wines in Yinchuan as part of the Ningxia Wine Awards. What differences, if any, did you find between those wines and what you tasted in 2008 and 2009?

The wines selected for the tasting were surprising. They didn't display as much of the under ripe, green pepper, herbaceous, slightly weedy notes I was expecting. Instead they showed **pleasant, clean, ripe fruit character** and palate weight. It shows the region is **maturing** in a variety of ways.

What do you think about the potential there for varieties other than Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Gernischt?

There are a swag of **interesting varieties** that could be **better suited** to Ningxia conditions than Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Gernischt. Plus the flavor profile of the wines may be preferred by consumers. I know there are quite a **few trials in place**, and there are a host of **climatic and bureaucratic complexities**, but it's pretty difficult to reach the commercialization stage when everyone is fixated on Cabernet Sauvignon. Also, I am looking forward to the day tier two and tier three Chinese cities embrace **white wine**, but I'm not holding my breath.

Back to Xinjiang: What has been the biggest revelation from doing this project in Yanqi County?

The **winery** is **under construction** and won't be complete until next year. Although all the internal wine-making equipment is in place, the **building changes day by day**. I was away from the winery for five days or so and arriving back it was staggering to see how much had been achieved.

What do you do for fun in this part of the world?

I came prepared with an **e-reader** and a tone of **downloaded books**. I have read more books in the last two months than in the last 10 years.

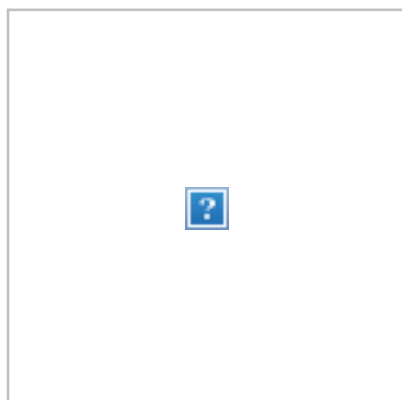
I've been very well taken care of and escorted to some **breathtakingly beautiful sites** around the area. **Bosten Lake** is the largest inland lake in China, covering 988 square kilometers, and the **Talimu River** is a vast inland river running through the desert.

Also see: [Q&A with Lilian Carter on working at Helan Mountain winery](#)

(Photos: Lilian Carter)



Carter takes a break in Xinjiang.





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