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Woman breaks new ground at vineyard

By Sharmila Devi For China Daily | China Daily USA | Updated: 2017-02-17 12:25



LINA FAN says the Chinese wine market will mature and change. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

It was fitting that Lina Fan didn't hesitate to order a glass of white wine to accompany our interview, even though it was the middle of the day. After all, she is the boss of a prestigious French wine company and the first Chinese woman to be accepted into the ratified society of Bordeaux winemakers.

She ordered a glass of Italian pinot grigio. After swirling the wine and inhaling deeply, she took a sip.

"Very basic. Very short aroma. This would sell in Italy for between 3 and 5 euros (\$3.2 and \$5.3)." The hotel was charging 9 (\$11.2) a glass.

Fan, 36, is chief executive officer of Vignobles des Quatre Vents, which was bought by Chinese company Liaoning Energy Investment in 2014. It was the first time a Chinese company had bought such a prestigious Medoc appellation - the legally protected geographic name under which wine in France may be sold and marketed.

Fan was in London to pick up an award from the Mulan Foundation Network, a UK-based organization that promotes successful Chinese women. She has lived in France since 2003, having studied wine at university and following that with a master's degree in wine marketing and management at the INSEEC business school in Bordeaux.

Fan is vibrant and dresses in a very French, chic fashion. Her outgoing personality has often helped her.

Hard work as well as luck has played a big part in her career. As a French language student, she got a summer job picking grapes in Reims, the main town in France's champagne region.

"I was tiny in those days, I only weighed 40 kilos, and the work was very hard, seven days a week. I could barely pick up the basket for the grapes but we are used to working hard in China," she says. "The family who owned the vineyard were fascinated to meet a Chinese person and to talk to me. This was when I first started to learn about wine."

Originally from Shenyang in Northeast China, she studied economics and management in China before moving to France.

"I thought about what I wanted. Did I really just want to get a job and to work, go home, eat

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and sleep every day? Life is too long to repeat the same thing every day. I like a challenge."

She considers winemaking to be an art form.

"Balance is very important, just like in people. But you don't want perfection because that's boring."

She is all the more remarkable given the recent tragedy in her life. In 2013, her husband, Wang Peng, was killed in a helicopter crash shortly before he was about to run the Fronsac wine estate for China's Brilliant Group. She has a daughter aged 7 and hopes her parents will move to France next year to help raise her.

"I've never worked in China and Bordeaux is my home. But I want my daughter to go to school in England because French schools are not very strict and children need rules."

She does not want her company to be "pigeon-holed as a Chinese-owned property" but wants people to focus on the wine and its quality. Production is small, only around 45,000 bottles a year. Prices are high because traditions, including hand-picking, must be maintained to retain the appellation.

Bottles can sell for 150 euros in France. The price is even higher in China because of import and duty costs. She believes there will be more demand in China as consumers become more knowledgeable about wine and why higher prices can be justified.

"The Chinese market barely existed 10 years ago and it is now in its teenage years," she says. "But it will mature and change."

Fan travels to China often and has a wine shop in Shenyang that she runs with her brother. "I love going back and helping to educate Chinese people with wine-tastings and by talking to them," she says.

In the meantime, she warns wine drinkers to avoid Bordeaux wines made in 2013.

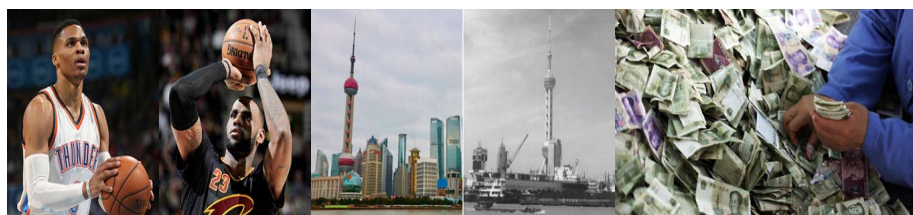
"It was one of the worst vintages in more than 10 years because of the weather, which decides 80 percent of the quality of wine. We had hailstones in spring and it was too hot in autumn," she says. "But 2014 was one of the best and 2015 was even better. The best for more than 30 years."

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