



Meili Mountain, Yunnan

# ABOVE THE CLOUDS

Linden visited the Ao Yun estate in Yunnan in June. These are his reflections on the trip.

Article and photographs © Linden Wilkie, October 2017

the  
FINE  WINE  
experience

There's always that internalized suspicion that when the world's leading luxury group is presenting something new to you that you may fall for the emotional pull they have carefully devised, and leave your rational sense behind. You know before you begin that the story will be a good one, but what about the substance?

These thoughts were in the back of my mind as we sat down with LVMH's Hong Kong representatives to taste a new premium Chinese wine called Ao Yun, or "above the clouds" in Tibetan.

Here, nestled high up in the mountains of northwest Yunnan province in China, are perched four small villages growing grapes for Ao Yun. It's an unlikely scenario, but when LVMH asked a consultant to search China for the best site possible (existing already or not) to make a world class luxury wine, that's what he came back with. These remote vineyards existed already, planted in the early 2000s under local initiative to diversify horticultural output. The vines – 90% Cabernet Sauvignon and 10% Cabernet Franc (co-planted at seemingly random intervals and not identified with markers) – were already reaching maturity when LVMH formed

a local partnership with the farmers in 2013.

In our shop on a June morning, my colleagues and I gathered to hear the presentation and taste the 2013 – the first Ao Yun wine, and made in difficult circumstances: the oak barriques were delayed in arriving at the new winery, and the wine spent its initial élevage in large Chinese storage vessels used in Baijiu production, later racked to oak when the barrels arrived.

What initially appealed to me about this wine was its wild character. Here's what I wrote as we tasted the 2013 Ao Yun:

*A clear, deep shade of garnet; a lifted, fresh, leafy, breezy sort of nose, a cool expression of varietal Cabernet Sauvignon, with a hint of earth and dark chocolate; fine, fleshy, fresh with a really zippy acidity which is set strikingly against the concentration and intensity of the dark fruit. The taste is pure fruit expression – no sense of oak – and it is bold and complex – ranging from confit tomato to blackcurrant to espresso. The expression is a little raw and wild, not fully refined, but bursting with energy, a pinch to the somewhat edgy cool finish. 93.*

1. Two metre tall Baijiu jars used for the 2013.  
2. Ao Yun 2013 © Ao Yun/ LVMH





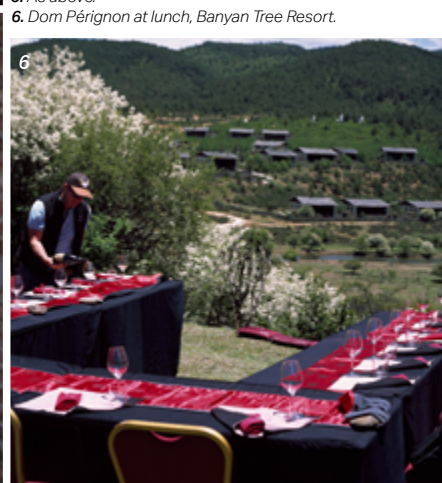


3. Da Bao Si Buddhist Temple near Ringha village.

4. One of our hosts, Ringha village.

5. As above.

6. Dom Pérignon at lunch, Banyan Tree Resort.



I couldn't recall tasting a Cabernet quite like this. It is bolder than almost any example from the northern Médoc, showing more the fruit intensity and alcohol of California's 'mountain' districts like Howell, Spring or Diamond, but with (even) higher acidity than that region usually delivers. Perhaps, Mendoza is more proximate, but not with this particular flavour. They seem to be on to something, I thought!

Two weeks later, I was on a plane bound for Ao Yun's vineyards – a visit organized and hosted by LVMH's Hong Kong representatives. From Hong Kong it is a three hour flight to Kunming, then a one hour flight to Shangri-la, followed by a five hour drive (including treacherous, barrier-less gravel mountain passes) to reach the Ao Yun winery. The journey, therefore, begins and ends in China. But, for someone like me who lives in Hong Kong it could hardly feel more remote: from the steamy, thick air

of Hong Kong to the sweet, dry, thin mountain air of Yunann; from one of the most densely vertical urban spots on Earth to one of the most isolated and rural; from a frenetic Cantonese culture led by financial markets and real estate, to a quieter, Tibetan-led one that revolves around cycles set by nature.

We broke the journey at Shangri-la City, the Dêqên Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture's seat, renamed from Zhōngdiàn to reflect in some of the mystique of James Hilton's 1933 hit novel *Lost Horizon*. There is indeed some resemblance to Hilton's Shangri-la – the high altitude (3160m) setting, the rich, fertile plain set in a natural mountainous amphitheatre, and set on a foothill pedestal before it, the Ganden Sumtsenling Monastery, its golden rooftops gleaming in the sun.

We began in one of the oldest surviving wooden buildings in the old town, and I

discovered as I tasted the extraordinarily tasty vegetables and mushrooms why Yunnan is so famous for them. I had my first, second and third taste of yak meat here – something we ate daily for the rest of the trip. Like venison, it is lean meat that needs careful cooking not to be chewy, but I liked its flavour.

In the Ringha village neighbouring our lodge, we learned to mix flour with yak's milk tea to make the high energy drink Tibetan locals use to get through the biting cold winters one day, and sipped chilled Dom Pérignon with our hilltop picnic the next.

In the evening, with Ao Yun's man on the ground, estate manager Maxence Dulou, we tasted the 2014 Ao Yun:

*Deep purple in the glass; a lovely open nose, floral, very Cabernet Sauvignon varietal vibrancy, some pencil shavings in the background; on the palate this is very fresh, juicy and fine-textured, with polished tannins, intense blackcurrant-like fruitiness, and good fresh extension on the finish. 93.*

In some ways I personally prefer the 2013 for its wild character – it feels a bit untamed. With the 2014, there is more refinement and control. That makes it a bit more in the international groove, style-wise, but there is still a special aroma, flavour and sheer intensity of fruit here. It's more stylish than the 2013, less wild. (You'll just have to decide for yourself!).

As part of a smaller group, we set off in two Landcruisers on the long journey to Ao Yun's vineyards. Despite a modern motorway system that includes considerable tunnelling and bridge work, and the steady stream of lorries linking Tibet with Yunnan and beyond, the clash between this, and a slower, more traditional culture is everywhere in evidence. Small tuk tuk like vehicles





On this page:  
7-10. On the road from Shangri-La to Ao Yun.  
11. White Horse Mountain view during the journey.

On next page:  
12. Our journey's peak altitude lookout at 4292m above sea level.  
13. Shouri village vineyard.



would splutter along, or we would find them parked right on the highway. We would often have to drive on the wrong side of the motorway to avoid cattle. The mountains are immense, leaving the constant sense that our road trail was perched on the side of a cliff, so steep and deep was the drop below us, and so much higher was the slope above us that the sheer scale was disorienting.

So thin was the air at the peak of the mountain pass – at 4292 metres above sea level – that it was an effort to get out of the Landcruiser and take a couple of photos. We sipped a special Tibetan tea to relieve altitude sickness, and cannisters of oxygen were on hand, but the feeling of slight nausea, dizziness, shortness of breath and lack of energy was unlike anything I had experienced before.

Finally, after five hours that had ended with a zig-zag climb up a dirt road avoiding cattle, we reached the first of four villages containing Ao Yun's vineyards – at Shouri village. After so long a drive, it seemed such a small site – a garden surrounded by a few simple houses, a tiny ledge in the mountainside (2600m) with expansive views of the Lancang river below. Somewhere just over the horizon lay the borders with Myanmar, and India's easternmost point at Arunachal Pradesh. And if we had stayed on the highway for another 31km we would have entered Tibet.

As Dulou explained, "the remoteness is a problem. We can be without power, it is difficult to receive things we need when we need them, and it is hard to attract and keep young people to work here." As we walked the vineyards, we were joined by his young assistant, a Chinese woman who studied wine science and viticulture in France. It was June, and growth was now rapid in the vines -- a lot to do. The highly



animated Dulou (difficult to photograph as he never stands still) has brought rigour, discipline, and precision to the viticulture at each of the four Ao Yun village vineyard sites. The vineyards are broken into small plots, divided by soil composition, drainage/water retention, aspect and exposure, vine age and

type, and so on. Each step in the work is discussed plot by plot. Altogether thirty hectares in four villages – Adong, Xidang, Sinong and Shouri – comprising 130 separate plots.

On the following day's visit to the Adong village vineyards (where the winery is





On this page:

- 14. Village house in Shouri.
- 15. Maxence Dulou and his assistant vineyard manager.
- 16. Maxence Dulou explains the training of the vines.
- 17. Dulou and his assistant discuss the day's work, Shouri village vineyard.
- 18 & 19. Shouri soil
- 20. Adong soil

On next page:

- 21. Vineyard worker, Adong, channeling an irrigation trench.
- 22. The modern Ao Yun winery from the vineyard at Adong.
- 23. Irrigation channel for new vines.
- 24. Adong village vineyard view toward Meili mountain range.
- 25. Dawn at 7am, but light reaches the vineyard at Adong at 9am.
- 26. Dulou and vineyard worker, Adong.
- 27. Dulou draws a 2016 sample of Ao Yun from barrel.
- 28. Dulou and his winemaking team, Ao Yun winery.





also located), local farmers were hoeing small irrigation channels to assist some newly planted vines.

The *terroir* is interesting. In Shouri we saw an exposed three metre drop in the vineyard, showing a deeply gravelly clay soil. At Adong, we observed denser clay. What was particularly interesting was the altitude (between 2100 and 2600 metres), with its high diurnal temperature range. The bright sunshine, with high UV boosts ripening, but this is mitigated by short sunlight hours – even in summer – because of the long shadow cast by the mountains in the deep valleys. At 7am on our visit, it was bright and sunny, but the vineyard at Adong was fully draped in shadow. That veil was not lifted until 9am. The reverse occurred at dusk. Cumulatively, it's a great loss of sunlight, and that is mitigated by generally good weather late in the season. This favourable weather yields the chance to harvest later.

For me, the real sense that Ao Yun could be a lasting project with a world class reputation in the making came when we went into the cellar and tasted village by village, barrel lot by barrel lot. It was like listening to a symphony, one orchestral section at a time. Each plot was fascinating, and each village seemed to contribute something significant. The vintage in question was the yet-to-be-assembled 2016. Most of what we tasted was Cabernet Sauvignon, but Cabernet Franc and Merlot (more recently planted) were tasted too. It made the visit much more like tasting in a Burgundy cellar – all Pinot, but a range of expressions, or perhaps more closely, a Hermitage cellar, *lieu-dit* by *lieu-dit*. (I would love to repeat the experience in a Médoc cellar).

Here are my notes, to give some sense to the components:



2016 Xidung village, plot A, Cabernet Sauvignon, from gravelly soil.

---

*Full purple; sweet, very scented, lifted, exuberantly fresh, complex nose, with sweet herbs and fruit; taut on the palate, bright, intense, with fresh violets, sweet herbs, and a long supple finish, pure and fresh.*

2016 Xidung village, plot B, Cabernet Sauvignon from sandy soil.

---

*Sweeter fruit on the nose, very open and scented, a juicy plump nose; moderate palate richness, round-texture, fruity, less complex and lacking the herbal dimension of plot A, and the tannins are less silky. Coarser overall, but ripe and ample. (This was the first plot of the 2016 crop, tending to over-ripeness).*

2016 Sinong village, plot D, Cabernet Sauvignon, clay and gravelly soil.

---

*Pure, grand and aromatic, really refined, violetty (no herbs); ample fruit on the palate, very good tension, wonderful fruit depth and juiciness and fine grip; it gave me the impression of a sort of Cabernet version of Pommard-Rugiens Bas. Layered in feel. Beautiful fruit, with an attractively bittersweet twist at the end.*

(At this point I asked if Ao Yun had any plans for any single vineyard or village-designated wines. Dulou was emphatic that they didn't, though it is true in the other direction, that Ao Yun declassify wine they don't think is up to the blend).

2016 Sinong village, plot E, Cabernet Sauvignon, a more compact plot with more clay.

---

*(From a new barrel), quite sweet and more spicy on the nose, rich, taut, dark fruit with a touch of Christmas cake richness to it; still vibrant acidity, but more density and richness.*

2016 Shouri village, plot K, Cabernet Sauvignon, from a lower site.

---

*A cooler expression, a touch of green herbs, this is also a little reduced right now, taut on the palate with an airy feel, piquant but fresh-ripe. There's coolness and refreshment in this, with a moderate to lighter weight body, good minerality ("more Volnay", I noted), a chicory edge to the supple finish.*

2016 Shouri village, plot H, from soil with more water reserve, more clay, less stone, and picked later.

---

*A cool nose, a touch more vegetal; compact, intense dark fruit, blackcurrant, some blackcurrant leaf, concentrated with a more robust, muscular texture.*

2016 Adong village, the first crop of Merlot from young vines.

---

*Fresh, slightly herbal nose; plump, but less rounded and less dense. Some attractive florals. A good but 'small' wine.*

2016 Adong village Cabernet Sauvignon, from a block with more gravel and clay.

---

*Complex nose, smoky, floral, a grand and noble nose; intense with fine grip on the palate, layered fruit, very grand.*

2016 blended press wine

---

*Deep purple; very intense fruit aroma; a touch chewy, powerful, sweet, with good freshness, abundant but with supple tannins – impressive for a press wine.*

---



Having tasted all of these lots, I understood the finished 2013 and 2014 better. Some of Ao Yun's complexity comes across as something a bit contradictory – rich, intense and even weighty, with a solid New World level of alcohol, yet also with a sense of layering, with complexity, with cooler more herbal notes that can veer into the wild and exotic, brilliantly intense yet natural tasting acidity and liveliness.

For the Chinese market, and for China as the point of origin, Ao Yun is something to be proud of already. For international lovers of fine Cabernet Sauvignon, the quality is there, but more importantly, there is something sufficiently different in the expression of Ao Yun to justify choosing it from time to time, in the same way that lovers of fine Bordeaux enjoy Napa, Bolgheri or Mendoza from time to time.

The challenges for Ao Yun seem considerable however. In any new wine region learning how to adapt viticultural practices to local *terroir* takes science and intuition, but also some degree of trial and error. When you are first in a region to aim for a level of quality, you cannot look over your shoulder or talk to your neighbours. The remoteness makes getting supplies more problematic, and it is harder to retain the wine school graduates needed when jobs are available closer to the cities.

The biggest challenge however will be forging international recognition and acceptance amongst journalists, sommeliers, and consumers. John Daniel, Jr. made Napa Valley's finest Cabernet Sauvignons in the 1940s and 1950s, yet it is said that he never made a profit. He was more the artist than the promoter, and he was ahead of his time. But there must always be *someone* ahead of their time, and in the

world of luxury products, it would be hard to beat Ao Yun's owners, LVMH, at this task. And much like Ornellaia after Sassicaia for Bolgheri, perhaps Ao Yun could benefit from some healthy competition in this remote corner of Yunnan. The late, great Robert Mondavi understood that to sell his wine he had to lift the image of Napa Valley as a whole in every market he worked. When we drink wines like those today, it is hard to imagine the time when people raised an eyebrow at the suggestion of wines to compete with Bordeaux from such then-new regions, but they did. California's wins in the 1976 Judgment of Paris tastings came as a shock. Whether Ao Yun will prove a success as China's breakthrough luxury wine remains to be seen. But based on what I tasted, saw, and experienced, I think they have all the necessary ingredients in place, and I wish them well.

Many thanks to LVMH/MHD and Ao Yun for the chance to experience this amazing place, and this endeavour first-hand.





## THE FINE WINE EXPERIENCE

[www.finewineexperience.com](http://www.finewineexperience.com)

Shop D, 85 Queen's Road West, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong

**Tel:** +852 2803 0753 | **Fax:** +852 2803 0776

Opening Hours:

Monday to Friday 10am - 7:30pm

Saturday 1pm - 7pm

Sunday & Public Holiday Closed