

# A TASTE OF SPRING

## VINEYARD VISITS AND SEASONAL WINES

by Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker

Come springtime, a teasingly short season in Beijing, wine lovers often switch to lighter reds, rosés and white wines, at least in the northern hemisphere. But wherever you are, spring is also a fairly good time to visit wine regions. This month, we offer advice on visiting wineries, have a quick look at Beijing's local vineyards and recommend some lighter wines to enjoy.

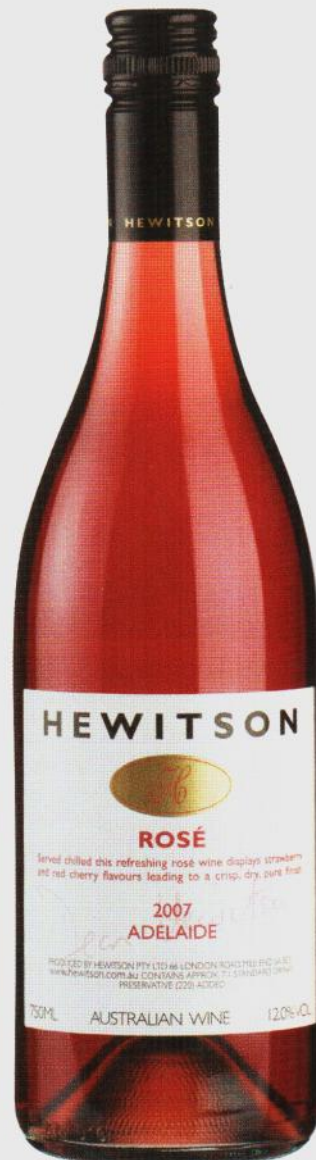
In the northern hemisphere, May is a critical time in the vineyard. Vine growers carefully observe whether their vines have flowered properly because this will determine the "fruit set" – how grape clusters form. The wineries themselves are generally a bit quieter as wines from the previous year are either close to bottling or happily maturing in barrel or tank. In the southern hemisphere, harvest occurs in March. Thus, by May, wines are already in tanks bubbling away. Another good period to pay a call.

Wherever you visit, from France's top regions to Washington State, make sure to book an appointment. This tells the winery you are serious about visiting their property and haven't just rolled up on a booze cruise (even if you have, you're likely to get access

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to "the better stuff" by having the courtesy to ring ahead). Some regions are more commercially geared than others – Australia has cellar door facilities and Napa Valley well-heeled tasting rooms – and will involve a tasting fee. In Burgundy, however, you should never really have to pay, at least if visiting a "domaine." These usually double as people's homes and winemaking facilities where no sales take place.

Whatever the set-up, hold your glass by the stem, swirl the wine, sniff, take a good gulp, slurp and spit out. Ask for a spittoon if one is not nearby. Make notes on each wine. The more seriously you approach each glass, the more you'll notice and the more



likely the winery will open other bottles for you to taste. Do some research too. Generally, winery personnel are more engaging if you know something about their property. If they're professional, they should not be afraid to answer just about any question.

If you're unlikely to venture far from Beijing, try a local vineyard. Dragon Seal, currently located in the heart of Haidian, is where French wine-maker Jérôme Sabaté makes drinkable wines from exclusively Chinese grapes sourced from nearby Hebei. (Make appointments at [www.dragonseal.com](http://www.dragonseal.com).)

There's also the experimental "Sino-

French" Demonstration Vineyard where winemaker Li Demei produces some fascinating wines (visits for around RMB 150 can be arranged; call +0313 684 9882 or e-mail [cfm-winery@sohu.com](mailto:cfm-winery@sohu.com)). Or you can try Beijing's organic winery, Chateau Bolongbao. Tastings and visits can be booked by phoning English-speaker Tony Chen at 139 1072 2833.

Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker run Dragon Phoenix Fine Wine Consulting ([www.longfeng-wines.com](http://www.longfeng-wines.com)), Beijing's first independent wine consultancy and are authors of the *Dragon Phoenix Wine Blog*.

### SELECT SIPS

#### One to quaff

**2007 Hewitson Rosé, South Australia (RMB 176)**

Hewitson is one of the best producers in South Australia, sourcing fruit from multiple regions around Adelaide. This rosé is a deep pink-red packed with strawberry and red cherry fruit. The palate is dry with lifting acidity and not too alcoholic at 12 percent. Very food-friendly and also a good aperitif. (Available from The Wine Republic; contact James Hutchinson at [james@thewinerepublic.com](mailto:james@thewinerepublic.com))

#### One to drink

**2007 Sileni "The Lodge" Chardonnay, Hawke's Bay, New Zealand (RMB 249)**

Based in Hawke's Bay on New Zealand's North Island, Sileni makes reliable, distinctive wines across the range. This Chardonnay is medium gold in color with a citrus and

slight pineapple fruit nose marked with toasty oak. The palate has decent fruit, refreshing medium-high acidity, balanced alcohol and good length. A richer white for spring. (Available from Jointek Fine Wines; contact Shan Huang at 137 0119 8297)

#### One to savor

**2006 Craggy Range Te Muna Road Pinot Noir, Martinborough, New Zealand (RMB 458)**

Another Kiwi wine – this one a perfect red for springtime. An attractive red-purple with a complex nose of restrained red fruits, violets and other perfumed notes with integrated oak. The palate has refreshing high acidity, silky tannins and superb length. (Available from Montrose; contact Rebecca Li at [rebecca@montrosechina.com](mailto:rebecca@montrosechina.com))