

Red Obsession review: China uncorked

East challenges West in the battle for the best of the bottle.



Driven to drink: Red Obsession's director of photography Steve Arnold (left) and master of wine Andrew Caillard on the Silk Road.

A good documentary takes time, but the internet doesn't care about that and it's changing the way people demand information. Tomorrow's newspaper is already behind the news, regardless of its quality, and a film that takes three years to complete is going to be behind its story, no matter how careful its approach. That's true of Red Obsession, which is mostly about events in the world of fine French red wine from 2009 through 2011. I'm not sure why the film has taken so long to complete, but that is usually a matter of money, which is, funnily enough, the subject of the film itself.

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In a sense, it doesn't matter too much, because the Australian filmmakers Warwick Ross and David Roach take a long view. With the help of Australian master of wine Andrew Caillard, they gained access to many of the great chateaux of Bordeaux as wine prices were going stratospheric. They spared no

expense in the cinematography, which has been superbly handled by Lee Pulbrook and Steve Arnold. This is one of the most beautiful films I've seen about wine in general, and Bordeaux and its magical product in particular. We get a series of aerial shots in golden light that establish the Medoc's important proximity to the water, the rich combination of soil and sunlight, and the extraordinary architecture of the chateaux built here in the past 300 years. If ever there was a film that demanded that old cinema gimmick, Smell-O-Vision, this is it. Russell Crowe lends his deep, smoky, cabernet-inflected tones to the sparing narration.

The interviews with leading Bordeaux winemakers are filmed so as to make us aware of how much money, tradition and prestige are involved here. Everyone talks about the importance of the "terroir", the unique qualities of the poor soil, the need for love in the making of wine, but it's clear that they love the subject and the product. Roach and Ross first teamed up in 1988 to make *Young Einstein with Yahoo Serious*. They appear to be taking us on a picturesque and romantic wine route, but that is a sleight of hand. This is a film about money and class, and the transfer of wine prestige from West to East with the rise of China. It's about the shock of France's old-world snobbery running into the vulgarity of Chinese money.

About 20 minutes in, having established the courtly manners of the Bordeaux establishment, the action shifts to Shanghai and Hong Kong, from the people who make and sell the wine to those who buy it. Some of them even drink it, although the boss of a leading London brokerage estimates that half of Bordeaux's annual production is bought and sold by investors who never see a bottle of Margaux or Latour.

This is where things get compelling, as we meet some of the new billionaires and traders in wine. An English financier in Shanghai estimates there are now 600 US dollar billionaires in China. "That's more than the US," says Rupert Hoogewerf, publisher of the Hurun Report, best known for its "China Rich List". Jeannie Cho Lee, a Hong Kong-based writer and Asia's first master of wine, says that it only takes about a dozen of these to be interested in wine to have a major impact. A man who made his billions making sex toys shows us his wine cellar, while smoking his pipe. He says when he was younger he used to prefer sex, now he prefers wine.

It's made clear in the film that the Chinese enthusiasm for wine is matched in part by their ignorance of the product: the Chinese drink very little wine per head of population, though consumption is growing. Chateau Margaux recently sponsored the Miss Universe China contest, part of which involved

teaching 32 of China's most beautiful women the "proper" (i.e. French) way to drink wine.

Perhaps most interesting is the final section, where we see China's response to the "magic" of wine, which is to grow their own. In far north-western Ningxia province, someone recently spent \$50 million building a single winery. In 40 years' time, given all the Chinese planting, they plan to be the world's biggest producer of wine. Chinese wines are starting to win prizes in world competitions, their makers having been trained in places such as Chateau Palmer in France. Zoot alors.

An end title tells us that Bordeaux prices have dropped 60 per cent since the madness of 2010 and that the 2011 crop was affected by extreme weather. This alerts us to a question the filmmakers do not ask, but should have: how are the Bordelais preparing for climate change? Wine has been grown in Bordeaux for more than 2000 years, since the Romans, but no one knows what the effect of recent temperature rises will be. Hail hit the Bordeaux crop hard at the end of July, in the height of summer. The more things change, the more they might change.