

Winemaking in Myanmar: Identity and authenticity

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Abstract:

Purpose: To examine the identity and authenticity of the emerging winemaking and gastronomic tourism industry in Myanmar through reference to the two wineries in the Inle Lake region

Design/methodology/approach: The design for this study evolved from fieldwork undertaken in Myanmar during three visits in February 2013 and 2014, and March 2015. Fieldwork included observation and participation in cultural and gastronomic tourism, as well as ethnographic interviews with the two winemakers currently working at Aythaya and Red Mountain wineries in the Inle Lake region. The approach for analysing the data collected is grounded in anthropological methods, focusing on how the places, people, practices, products and politics are influencing the emerging winemaking and gastronomic tourism industry in Myanmar.

Findings: The results of this research indicate that there are several factors extraneous to wine that have influenced identity and authenticity in the emergence of winemaking in Myanmar. These factors relate to distinctive places, individual people, local practices, and current politics, more than the oenological products themselves.

Practical implications: Assessment of potential for further development of winemaking and gastronomic tourism in Myanmar

Keywords: Myanmar, wine, identity, authenticity, gastronomic tourism,

1. INTRODUCTION

In the minds of most, Myanmar is more frequently associated with politics than winemaking. This is hardly surprising given the country's closed policies under military junta rule for 50 years. However incongruous it may seem, there are currently two European winemakers making grape wines in Myanmar's Inle Lake region: German Hans Leiendecker at Aythaya - Myanmar First Vineyard Estate, and Frenchman François Raynal at Red Mountain Estate Winery. They are pioneers in the Myanmar winemaking industry, an industry whose potential to grow may depend on factors extraneous to the quality of wine they can produce.

Focusing on these two wineries, this paper will examine the identity and authenticity of the emerging winemaking and gastronomic tourism industry in the Inle Lake region. Grounded in ethnographic observation and interviews with the two winemakers, the study will analyse how places, people, practices, products and politics are influencing the development of tropical viticulture in Myanmar. After presenting the methodology, I will provide a brief politico-historical and market-oriented background to contextualise the winemaking and gastronomic tourism industry in Myanmar. The data derived from ethnographic observation, participation and interviews will then be interpreted according to the five categories of potential influence, to weigh up the importance of each in the further development of winemaking in Myanmar.

2. METHODOLOGY

Using ethnographic methods and anthropological analysis to understand winemaking and wine marketing is a growing academic practice, following the rise of anthropological food studies that place emphasis on the cultures of producers, participants, provenance and terroir (Trubek, 2008). The recent edited collection *Wine and Culture: Vineyard to Glass* (Black and Ulin, 2013) exemplifies this trend. The particular case of tropical winemaking in Asia poses a series of issues relating mainly to viticultural challenges and gastronomic tourism, with the few studies in this area focusing on Thailand (Pigott, 2006; Batra, 2008; Banks et al, 2013; Lao-Hakosol and Walsh, 2014). The theoretical frames proposed by Beverland on brand identity and authenticity (2009) and several other scholars on authenticity in wine tourism (Carlsen and Charters, 2006; Pikkemaat et al, 2009; Wilson, 2013; Hall, 2013), are less relevant in Myanmar due to the non-indigenous and political nature of almost every aspect of the industry. Given the relative lack of information available about these wineries and winemakers in academic or other publications, this paper relies heavily on observation during three fieldwork trips and the experiences conveyed in interviews with the two winemakers, triangulated with Myanmar's political background and socio-cultural context outlined below.

It was during my first trip to Myanmar, as a participant in the inaugural Irrawaddy Literary Festival in Yangon in February 2013, that I became aware of Myanmar's two wineries. Aythaya and Red Mountain Estate wines were both served at various functions during the festival, showcasing the local gastronomic culture alongside the literary culture. The wineries were also mentioned as tourist destinations in the Lonely Planet guide, but I did not have the opportunity to visit them at this time. My second visit was planned to include both participating in the Irrawaddy Literary Festival in Mandalay in February 2014, and interviewing the two winemakers at Aythaya and Red Mountain Estate for a new research

project on identity and authenticity in winemaking in Myanmar. I contacted each of the winemakers by email to organise interviews and send them questions. Earlier questions related to their background and experiences in the winery, while later ones focused on identity and authenticity. I spent three hours interviewing Leiendecker and one hour with Raynal. I spent six hours at each winery observing interactions between the winemakers, other employees, customers, and tourists. In March 2015, I returned to Myanmar for the Irrawaddy Literary Festival in Mandalay and observed some further developments in the local wine industry in Myanmar, but did not return to the wineries.

3. BACKGROUND

A brief overview of the history and politics, trade and tourism in Myanmar helps situate the winemaking culture in its unique and peculiar context, and assists in triangulating the data.

3.1 Myanmar's History and Isolationist Policies

The country that we now think of as Myanmar (or Burma) formed around the ancient capital of Bagan from 1044-1287. British colonial rule for almost 100 years (1852-1948) promoted Western tastes as aspirational in the upper echelons of Burmese society, including wine consumption, though stronger liquors were more common (Fischer-Tiné, 2012). Independence in 1948 brought political and economic instability, leaving the way open for Army Chief of Staff General Ne Win to garner power and eventually stage a military coup, leading to the closed socialist state from 1962-1988. The military junta's violent repression of human rights (1988-2007) provoked international economic sanctions, which left many starving while the military and their cronies profited from their positions, trading gas, minerals, jade, rice and other agricultural products with China throughout this period (Thant Myint-U, 2006). Education and knowledge of the world outside Myanmar was highly restricted during the 50 years of socialist rule. However, the elite maintained a taste for Western bourgeois status symbols, including French wines.

3.2 Myanmar's Opening to International Trade and Tourism

The gradual opening up of Myanmar to international business, trade and tourism, following the lifting of trade sanctions has seen unprecedented opportunities for agricultural and mining investment, infrastructure and transport development, as well as hospitality and tourism (Steinberg, 2013). Myanmar is a nevertheless still a confronting place for Western tourists. It does not have the everyday luxury of Bali, nor the great infrastructure and cheap accommodation of Thailand, nor the wonderful gastronomic culture of Laos and Cambodia, and yet it is twice or three times as expensive to travel there. Other inconveniences include getting an entry visa, no telephone roaming, not enough hotels, no homestay allowed, and no ATMs. Tourism statistics show an increase in visitors from 300,000 in 2011 to 1 million in 2012, 2 million in 2013, 3 million in 2014, and 4.5 million predicted for 2015. Western tourists – who are the most likely to seek out wine and winery experiences – still only represent about 30% of tourists, as most are coming from Asia. The Myanmar Tourism Master Plan 2013-2020 forecasts 7.5 million visitors for 2020, and mentions “culinary tourism” and “agritourism” but no “wine” tourism.

Although wine is not an indigenous beverage, like rice wine, palm wine (t'an-ye) or the fruit wines made from damson plums north of Mandalay in Pyin Oo Lwin, it has been available to the elite in Myanmar, mainly imported from Europe, and more recently from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, to fill the wine lists of restaurants and hotels catering to international tourists and business travellers. Until very recently, these were the only businesses, along with the government and duty-free shops, licenced to import alcohol from abroad. A black market wine trade developed, feeding supermarkets and liquor shops with untaxed wine, imported through these licencees, making French, Italian, Australian wines available at cheaper prices than they could be bought elsewhere in Asia or the rest of the world. It was in this unregulated wine market that Aythaya and Red Mountain Estate commenced their production, competing with artificially low prices on imported wines. In March 2015, the Ministry of Commerce declared that limited foreign wine imports would be legalized in April, phasing out a decades-long “ban” on alcohol imports (Mon, 2015). In theory, this should make Myanmar wine production more economically viable, but in 2013, wine constituted only 9% of alcoholic beverage consumption (IPSOS, 2013).

4. WINEMAKING IN MYANMAR – IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY

To examine the identity and authenticity of the emerging winemaking and gastronomic tourism industry in Myanmar, case studies of the two wineries in the Inle Lake region have been developed, analysing the data collected to establish categories of places, people, practices, products and politics. Unless otherwise stated, this data is drawn from observations and interviews, and triangulated with contextual social, historical and political research.

4.1 Places

Each of the wineries are located in geographically and culturally distinctive places near Inle Lake, in the Shan state, which provide both with a strong spatial identity. Inle Lake is a highly frequented tourist destination, known for its diverse ethnic groups, floating markets, and excellent food. Aythaya – Myanmar First Winery is about 40 kilometres from Inle Lake, inaccessible except by car, on the road between Heho airport and Taunggyi, the capital of Shan state. Taunggyi is a business and trade rather than tourist town and has been a weather station since British settlement in the early 20th century, about 1300 metres above sea level. It was for all these reasons that German entrepreneur Bert Morsbach chose to establish his 100% foreign owned vineyard here in 1999, after first planting 3000 European grape vines in Loikaw, Kayah State in 1998. Due to ethnic unrest in that region, Morsbach lost access to his first vineyard, but undeterred started again at Aythaya with another 10,000 vines, including chardonnay, chenin blanc, sauvignon blanc, muscat, cabernet sauvignon, and syrah. Having access to weather records showing climactic patterns over the last century gave him confidence in spite of his lack of experience with vines – he had grown organic basmati rice and other agricultural crops in Asia. With temperatures down to 5°C at night and 30°C in the day, minimal humidity and plenty of sunshine in the dry season (October-May), and calcareous soils that resemble the terroir of Chablis, the 25 hectares he planted at Myanmar's first vineyard began producing wine in 2004. Although foreigners cannot yet buy property in Myanmar, the German consortium has secured a 20 year lease, and established luxury accommodation at the Monte diVino lodge, surrounded by vines, overlooking the excellent

restaurant, modest winery building, and a swimming pool complete with palm trees and bougainvillea. It is a charming setting that combines the practicality of small-scale production with facilities catering for exclusive wine tourism as well as business meetings and functions.

Red Mountain Estate is much closer to Nyaung Shwe, a tourist hub with a train and bus station, plenty of accommodation at all levels, which is the main access town for Inle Lake. It is 1000 metres above sea level, with 80 hectares planted with a wide range of varieties across the picturesque slopes, including sauvignon blanc, syrah, cabernet sauvignon, petit verdot, carignan, chardonnay, muscat petit grain, tempranillo, and pinot noir. The site was established in 2002, when the owner Nay Win Tun, a well-known Myanmar businessman (gem trading, mining, concrete) and parliamentary representative of the Pa-O People, recruited François Raynal to build the winery, purchase equipment and plant the vines. Some local plants and 7,300 plants imported from France were established in 2003, with many more brought in from Israel and Spain, and the first wines were made in 2006. The state of the art winemaking equipment, imported from Italy in 2003, and the underground wine cellar dug in 2009 attest to serious financial investment for large-scale production. A restaurant was opened in 2011 that takes full advantage of the incredible views over the vine-clad hills and Inle Lake. The winery is easily accessible by bicycle, taxi or hiking and does not offer any accommodation.

4.2 People

4.2.1 *The Winemakers*

Hans Leiendecker had an illustrious career as head winemaker for Weingut Dr H. Tanisch for 16 years, famous for its Bernkasteler Doctor vineyard and award winning Rieslings. Recruited by Morsbach in 2006 after responding to an advertisement in a wine magazine, Leiendecker was looking for new challenges and found them at Aythaya. He is a bold, innovative person, a confident communicator with an engaging personality. He is financially invested in the company and personally invested in Myanmar: he has married a Karen Christian woman, Ei Ei Brown Naw, who now runs the restaurant and accommodation and assists with the administration and local recruitment. Leiendecker's personal identity infuses the wine tourism experience, as he greets visitors with warmth and spends much time talking to tourists and business clients.

François Raynal studied winemaking in France before becoming a “flying winemaker”, consulting in Turkey, Chile, Israel, Hungary, New Zealand, Thailand, and now Myanmar. He is a paid consultant to the company, and is obviously proud of his achievements, having won an international award for his pinot noir. His manner is polite and discreet, but he does not mingle with tourists visiting the winery. He showed me around the vineyards and winery, and answered my questions succinctly. His identity as a “French” winemaker is profiled on the Red Mountain Estate website and all publicity material, rather than imprinting his “personal” identity on the wine tourism experience.

4.2.2 The Employees

At Aythaya, all of the employees are from Myanmar, with the majority being of Karen Christian ethnic/religious background. Many of them already speak English well thanks to their religious education, but if not, they are given lessons to improve their communication in English. They are trained to tend the vines and taste the wines, so that they can convey their knowledge to tourists and consumers. The problem is that after they have been trained in English and wine tasting, they often leave to work in the hospitality industry in less isolated surroundings. In an attempt to retain more employees after investing in their training, Aythaya has offered them health care benefits and extra education in the non-harvesting season, creating a community around the winery. There is an effort to encourage identification with the winery and its aims, which include quality, service, communication, and knowledge.

Given that the owner of Red Mountain Estate is leader of the Pa-O people, an ethnic minority whose traditions have been all but forgotten (Chann, 2004), most of the employees at his winery are from this disempowered ethnic minority. According to the Red Mountain Estate website, there are three specialist Myanmar staff – U Salai (Chemist), U Yu Naing (Vineyard Manager) and U Thae Maung (Myay Phyu 55 ha site manager) – plus around 100 employees at the winery, most of whom are described as having a university degree in agriculture. They are trained to use the machinery, tend the vines, and serve the customers, but they have no knowledge of the wine or wine culture. Raynal stated that no one but himself is allowed to taste the wine, following the owner's directives. Those who were serving tourists and customers were young and had low-level skills in English or French or German, only able to communicate in a few standard service phrases. While no community around the wine is encouraged, there is already identification among employees through their ethnic community.

4.2.3 The Visitors and Consumers

Few tourists make the trek up to Aythaya for a random wine tasting. If they do, they are welcomed warmly by Leiendecker or other knowledgeable employees. The winery and restaurant receives more patronage by Myanmar and Chinese businessmen, who enjoy the environment and elite status associated with wine tasting. During my visit, a table of evidently important government employees were meeting and dining at Aythaya.

Leiendecker mentioned that they host many functions for Taunggyi businesses who see the winery as neutral but prestigious territory to invite guests. There are more regular customers than “one-off” tourists, promoting a growing community around the winery. Red Mountain Estate attracts mainly Western tourists who have read about it in Lonely Planet, Rough Guide or other guidebooks and are intrigued by the unexpected exoticism of a winery in Myanmar. They taste the wines with little or no information about the products, hardly any interaction or exchanges with the staff, and narratives on tripadvisor suggest that the experience is more about the view than the wine. No real connections or community form around the winery.

4.3 Practices

The practices or processes adopted by both Aythaya and Red Mountain Estate in their winemaking are partly constrained by the climate and partly dictated by political factors.

Located between 20.6 and 20.7° Latitude, these wineries correspond to the definition of tropical viticulture (Commings et al, 2012), but their high altitude mitigates some of the worst humidity and therefore fungal issues faced in tropical winemaking. As the vines are never dormant, both wineries practice double pruning, heavy spraying for fungus in the wet season, allowing grapes to develop only in the dry season (October-May), with irrigation. Each vineyard harvests only about 25% of a “normal” yield per year (approximately 4 tons or 260 cases/hectare), making the whole process practically unviable in “normal” circumstances. The choice of varietal planting has been refined through trial and error in both wineries, each beginning with a wide range, though Aythaya was obliged to make more strategic decisions due to its smaller plot, while Red Mountain Estate has been able to maintain a greater variety. The main difference in practices comes from the scale of production; Aythaya is small-scale manual operation whereas Red Mountain Estate is a large-scale mechanized outfit. However, in addition to grapes from their 25 hectares near Taunggyi, Aythaya is sourcing syrah grapes grown by contract farmers on the Meiktila plains, about 100 kilometres away where table grapes have been grown for decades. Aythaya is also bringing in semi-fermented grape juice from South Africa, which is processed and bottled at Aythaya.

4.4 Products

Not all of the wines produced by Aythaya are “terroir” driven, but their labelling proudly displays Myanmar First Vineyard Estate, promoting the wine’s unique association with Myanmar. The main varietals grown at the winery are sauvignon blanc, red moscato, tempranillo and dornfelder, with some shiraz and cabernet sauvignon, producing a dry sauvignon blanc, a “late harvest” sweeter sauvignon blanc, a dry and a sparkling rosé (red moscato), a dessert wine, and a red blend under the Aythaya label. Production from this vineyard is about 50,000 bottles, but they can only supply about 20% of demand – which is why they have contracted grape growers from elsewhere in Myanmar and import semi-fermented grape juice from South Africa to produce the Monte Vino Red (cinsault and pinotage) and the Monte Vino White (chenin blanc and colombard). The overall production in 2012 was around 100,000 bottles, 200,000 bottles in 2013, with similar predictions for 2014 and 2015. Prices range from 10,000-14,000 kyats per bottle (\$11-15 AUD), which in the past, has been more expensive than some imported French and Italian wines (Michaels, 2013), though the new legislation around alcohol imports should change this discrepancy.

The wines of Red Mountain Estate are all made from estate grown grapes, producing about 120,000 bottles per year including shiraz, shiraz tempranillo, pinot noir, sauvignon blanc (dry and late harvest), chardonnay, rosé, as well as white muscat and red tawny fortified wines. Their prices are in line with those of Aythaya’s collection. In general, the white wines and rosé are better than the red wines. Reviews of the wines are mixed.

4.5 Politics

The political climate is a major mitigating factor in the identity and authenticity of the wines in each case. For Aythaya, a 100% foreign owned venture, much care must be taken to observe correct procedures for all property, imports, and sales. The restrictions on foreign property lease have obliged Aythaya to contract grape growers and import semi-fermented grape juice rather than extend their own property in Myanmar. They have also faced

problems in importing machinery, chemicals, bottles, and other essential products, with delays causing substantial losses. Red Mountain Estate encounters very few obstacles of this nature, being owned by a powerful Myanmar businessman, whose political connections ensure that the demands of his winery can be met in any event. Competition between the two wineries is not an issue, given the relatively small production for a high market demand for Myanmar wines. Aythaya is careful to manage their relationship with Red Mountain Estate, constantly referring to them as “our friends at Inle Lake”.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The paradigms of identity and authenticity that usually determine success in wine tourism destinations (Beverland 2009) are difficult to apply in the context of these two Myanmar wineries. Here, identity is based on places and people, and authenticity comes from practices and products, but both are determined by the current political situation in the country. Aythaya’s identity is much more strongly linked to the people – with the presence and personal investment of Leiendecker and his employees – than the place, given that due to political constraints much of its current production is sourced from outside the property. On the contrary, Red Mountain Estate’s identity is anchored in the place, privileging terroir with all grapes grown and wine made on the premises, but the people behind the wine are almost invisible, especially Nay Win Tun, whose name is rarely mentioned in press about the winery, for political reasons. Raynal’s French identity is foregrounded over any personal identity. The authenticity of Aythaya’s practices and products could be called into question if we consider that their Monte Vino wines are not really from Myanmar, but again, this is dictated by the politics of property. For Red Mountain Estate, the authenticity of their wines may be clear, but communication about their practices and the products is missing from the tourist experience. It seems that the quality of their product is less important than its identity and authenticity, because there is no real competition between the wineries for a market share in this unique niche area, and most of the consumption of Red Mountain Estate’s product is a one-off experience. Further development for winemaking and gastronomic tourism in Myanmar requires careful consideration of the current producers and their politics, and of the new legislation around importing wine in Myanmar, combined with wine business research. In the end, it is unsurprising that Myanmar is more associated with politics than winemaking.

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