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China’s wine buyers move beyond banquets toward everyday bottles

At ProWine Shanghai, exhibitors said consumers increasingly seek regional identity, distinctive stories, wines tailored to casual drinking occasions

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China’s wine market is becoming more selective, more varied and less tied to formal drinking occasions, according to exhibitors and buyers speaking at ProWine Shanghai, a shift that is pushing producers to sharpen how they present their products in one of the world’s most important beverage markets.

Organizers said the three-day trade fair brought together more than 620 wine and spirits exhibitors from 34 countries and regions, along with 21,800 trade visitors. The turnout underscored China’s continued importance for global suppliers, even as the market changes after years of rapid expansion.

What stood out at the fair was not a return to broad-based growth, but a stronger focus on differentiation. Producers and buyers described a market in which price and basic quality are no longer enough on their own. Wines increasingly need a clear identity, whether that comes from a specific region, grape variety, production method or drinking occasion.

That change was visible in the way some countries chose to exhibit. Spain did not rely only on a national pavilion. Rioja, Catalonia, Castilla y León, Toro and Yecla each appeared separately, highlighting their own climates, varieties and wine styles. The approach reflected a market where buyers want more precise information and where regional identity can be a selling point rather than a detail.

The range of countries represented also showed how competitive the market has become. Georgia, Serbia and Moldova appeared with national delegations alongside more established producers such as France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Australia and New Zealand. Wines and spirits from South Korea and Albania were shown at the event for the first time.

Frederico Falcão, president of Wines of Portugal, said Chinese buyers are looking beyond quality and price for wines with distinctive character. He said Portugal sees an opportunity to connect with suitable partners by emphasizing its range of wine regions and indigenous grapes.

For beverage companies, the shift could carry practical consequences. Wineries, importers and spirits producers trying to grow in China may need to rethink how they position their portfolios, how they work with distributors and which products they put forward. A market that rewards clearer differentiation and more casual consumption may favor suppliers that can explain origin, style and use more directly.

The same push toward specificity was visible among Chinese producers. Nearly 90 Chinese wineries took part in the exhibition, with major producing areas including Xinjiang, Ningxia and Yantai represented. Their presence highlighted how domestic producers are increasingly presenting Chinese wine through regional identity rather than as a single broad category.

Those regions offer sharply different growing conditions. Ningxia vineyards sit between the Helan Mountains and the Yellow River. Yantai is shaped by a maritime climate. Tibet offers high-altitude vineyards. Xinjiang includes diverse terrain and conditions across a wide area. Producers are using those differences to explain what sets their wines apart, mirroring a broader global trend toward terroir-based marketing.

Some Chinese winemakers are also defining themselves less by geography alone and more by production philosophy. Young Generation Creative Wine, or YGCW, returned to the fair with boutique wineries and independent projects from several regions. The group brings together younger producers experimenting with grape varieties, terroir expression and winemaking methods, with an emphasis on personal style.

That approach suggested that Chinese wine is being framed in two ways at once: by place and by producer. In practical terms, buyers are being asked to consider not only where a wine comes from, but also who made it and what choices shaped it. That can make Chinese wine easier to understand for trade visitors looking for distinctive products rather than generic labels.

Another major theme at ProWine Shanghai was the broadening range of situations in which people drink wine. Business banquets, gifting and formal meals have long played a large role in Chinese wine consumption. At the fair, exhibitors and buyers pointed to growing interest in smaller gatherings, casual restaurants, wine bars and drinking at home.

That shift matters because it changes what kinds of products work. Wines aimed at everyday consumption may need different pricing, packaging, service formats and storytelling than wines sold for gifting or high-level business entertaining. The same applies to spirits and low- and no-alcohol products, which were also part of the event.

The fair’s themed areas were designed around that idea. ProWine Bar & Bistro focused on how wine and spirits fit into relaxed dining settings. The outdoor-themed ProWine Class Camping Zone offered a more informal space for tasting, conversation and education. The ProWine Fine Wine Club targeted premium buyers, while ProWine Zero+ showcased low- and no-alcohol alternatives.

Tina Yun, a wine buyer at BLG WINES in Qinhuangdao, said her customers are increasingly interested in wines with distinctive styles and stories. She said that for a wine bistro, it is important to find wines that match everyday drinking occasions, and that the fair helped her discover new products and ideas for a wine list.

The exhibition’s scale and programming showed that even in a tougher market, China remains a key meeting point for producers and trade buyers. Organized by Messe Düsseldorf Shanghai, part of Germany’s Messe Düsseldorf Group, the event began in 2013 as ProWine China, the first international satellite exhibition of Düsseldorf’s ProWein trade fair. Its role has been both to bring international wines and spirits into China and to help Chinese producers reach foreign markets.

This year’s theme, Vision Meets Business, reflected that commercial focus. Alongside the exhibition floor, forums and masterclasses gave visitors opportunities to discuss market trends, taste across regions and categories, and build business relationships.

Frank Schindler, global project director of ProWein, said the global wine and spirits industry is going through significant change and that producers and buyers still need targeted business links, knowledge exchange and long-term partnerships. He said China remains a key part of the group’s global strategy as companies adjust to changing market conditions and look for new opportunities.