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A partnership between French conglomerate Moët-Hennessy and Chinese *baijiu* consortium VATS has led to the creation one of the highest elevation wineries in the world. The joint venture is set to debut its first luxury vintage this summer, following years of negotiation and preparation.

The name of the vintage, Aoyun (敖云), translated by Moët as "roaming above the clouds", will be sold both in China and internationally while supplies last. At 1,600 yuan (US\$250) per bottle — and a limited production of only 24,000 bottles — this luxury item is not for the casual purchaser, and for good reason. The cabernet's moniker was not selected based on flowery imagery, but rather on its literal existence.

After an exhaustive search on the part of Moët Hennessy, the corporation set up its first Chinese winery in the northwest region of Yunnan, north of [Shangri-la](#) (香格里拉). The facility is located in Adong Village (阿东村), in close proximity to where nineteenth century Jesuit missionaries originally planted vines brought to China from France.

Described as a "logistical nightmare" by Moët Hennessy Estates and Wines head Jean-Guillaume Prats, wine production has been anything but easy. Often operating with no electricity, and using yaks instead of tractors, most labor is manual and the output organic. During the first pressing, [according to a Bloomberg report](#), a driver delivering fermentation tanks over a 4,200-meter pass ran someone over, resulting in his imprisonment and the confiscation of his cargo. With no other choice, the grapes were instead fermented in locally made ceramic jars typically used in *baijiu* production.



The use of Yunnan land for wine production has been increasing for more than a decade, as the local government promoted the growing of cabernet grapes for farmers as a cash crop. In 2013, GoKunming [spoke to anthropologist Brendan Galipeau](#) about the trend. He described a process by which traditional wheat and corn farming increasingly switched to wine grapes. In some cases, families in the region replaced

nearly all of their staple crops in this manner, and for the first time had to buy necessities from neighbors or the market.

Over the intervening three years, the situation has evolved. Shangri-la Winery — owned by parent company VATS — retains nearly exclusive purchasing rights for grapes grown in the region, save for those cultivated by Moët Hennessy. Farmers continue to sell to VATS buyers at fluctuating market prices, while Moët Hennessy maintains a 70 percent ownership stake in vines growing on land it acquired in a 50-year lease — the other 30 percent owned by VATS. Speaking with Galipeau today, he says the presence of both companies has led to a more diversified market:

The Moët Hennessy lease pays farmers in Adong and other villages 2,200 yuan per *mu* [667 square meters] of land each year. This amount is guaranteed, regardless of how well or badly Moët does. On top of that, locals can work at the winery for 100 yuan a day, which has made them quite happy. They have a stable income paid for daily work, and still retain the option to farm or work elsewhere during their time off.

And so an improbable partnership nearly two centuries in the making continues, with both Yunnanese villagers and French entrepreneurs having to adapt to a strange new world. The first results will be commercially available beginning in June, following unveiling ceremonies at separate VinExpo events in both Hong Kong and Europe.

**Bottom image:** Moët Hennessy USA