

Pioneering winemaker finds early success in Myanmar hills

By Denis D. Gray
The Associated Press

AYTHAYA, Myanmar — When a democratically elected Myanmar president took office after decades of military rule, some toasted the historic moment with a beverage decidedly not paired with the tropical, Southeast Asian nation: surprisingly high-quality, locally produced wine.

They poured themselves an Aythaya Sauvignon blanc (“internationally competitive,” said one wine critic), a Shiraz-based red (“marvellous improvement over initial vintages”), or a refreshing sparkling rosé.

These all stem from Myanmar’s first winery, a pioneering effort by German entrepreneur Bert Morsbach, who overcame both political minefields and viticulturally virgin terrain to find himself catering to a growing middle class and booming tourism, which together create more demand than he can currently satisfy. He doesn’t even have enough left over for export.

Morsbach’s Aythaya estate could be mistaken for a corner of Provence or California’s wine country, in a verdant valley tucked into the Shan Hills of



northeastern Myanmar, and at 4,260 feet probably the highest vineyard in Asia. Visitors, including a number of young Burmese, sample its wines at his restaurant with panoramic sunset views over the gently undulating vineyard.

The harvests haven’t come easily. A genial one-time mining engineer, Morsbach was among just a handful of individual foreign businessmen in the

1990s operating in a largely isolated country where a xenophobic military regime made the rules. One minister, he said, simply appropriated an earlier venture. And Morsbach had no experience in winemaking, never mind doing it under tropical conditions.

“It was full of obstacles, adverse conditions, but it was a chance to do something new. That was the challenge and it had a

BURMESE BEVERAGES. A worker harvests grapes at Aythaya wine estate in Aythaya, near Taunggyi, the capital of northeastern Shan state, Myanmar. Myanmar’s first-ever winery is a pioneering effort by German entrepreneur Bert Morsbach, who overcame both political minefields and viticulturally virgin terrain to find himself catering to a growing middle class and booming tourism, which together create more demand than he can currently satisfy. (AP Photo/Esther Htusan)

reasonable chance of success,” said the 78-year-old Morsbach, whose résumé includes building factories in the United States, advising the Laos government, and introducing sailboarding to Asia.

In the first year of full production, 2004, the estate managed just 20,000 bottles. This has soared to as many as 200,000 bottles in recent years, and Morsbach said he is about to open another plant with a one-million-bottle capacity. He needs far more grapes than those grown on contract by 30 families and his current harvest from the 20-acre Aythaya vineyard.

Wine consumption in Myanmar is minuscule, so, Morsbach exults, the potential in the country of 52 million is immense.

“We are still working on our first glass,” said Hans-Eduard Leiendecker, Aythaya’s head winemaker, referring to

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DAM DEVELOPMENT. A dolphin emerges on the Mekong river at Kampi village in the northeastern province of Kratie, Cambodia, in this March 17, 2009 file photo. A new study predicts that if 11 proposed dams are built on the Mekong River, the famed Irrawaddy dolphin would likely disappear from the river. (AP Photo/Heng Sinith, File)

Vietnam warns of dire impact from planned Mekong dams

By Stephen Wright
The Associated Press

Research commissioned by Vietnam has warned of devastating environmental and economic effects for millions of people living along the Mekong River if 11 proposed dams are built on its main stream.

The two-and-a-half-year study by Danish water expert DHI was submitted recently by Vietnam to the Mekong River Commission, a body comprising Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that was set up to mediate the conflicting water priorities of Mekong countries.

The study predicts “high to very high adverse effects” on fisheries and agriculture in Cambodia and Vietnam if all 11 dams are built, and even greater damage if the Mekong’s tributaries also are dammed. The famed Irrawaddy dolphin would likely disappear from the Mekong, it says.

Unmitigated hydropower development will cause “long-lasting damage to the floodplains and aquatic environment, resulting in significant reduction in the socio-economic status of millions of residents,” according to the study.

Much of Southeast Asia is suffering a record drought due to El Niño, and officials in Vietnam have said the effects are exacerbated by existing Chinese dams on the upper Mekong. The rice-bowl-sustaining river system flows into Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Mekong is also one of the world’s largest inland fisheries, providing a livelihood to millions of people. Dams diminish fishing grounds by creating barriers to breeding-cycle migrations and creating river conditions that destroy habitat and food sources.

The study said agricultural production in the lower reaches of the Mekong Delta would drop steeply because the dams would trap river sediments, resulting in large reductions in the volume of nutrients flowing downstream. Less sediment downstream would also make the delta more at risk of saltwater incursion that can render land infertile.

It predicts annual fishery and farming losses of more

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