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Here's a toast to China: FLX international exports Finger Lakes wines

By John Christensen

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A father and son duo, Lance and Matthew McFetridge, are making their love of the Finger Lakes, of the wines produced there, and their connections to the Far East a new business opportunity.

Working with local wineries, Keuka Spring, McGregor Vineyard, Fox Run, Boundary Breaks, and Red Newt Cellars, the McFetridges are making sure the region is represented in the rapidly expanding wine market in China.

"We're working exclusively with an importer in Shanghai that is owned and run by a close friend, Kelvin Fu, who is a Keuka College bachelor's and master's degree graduate," says Matt. "Kelvin fell in love with the region when he was a student and decided to explore this further. We're working together to distribute the wines back in Shanghai, and to a few places in the Southwest of China, specifically Kunming, in Yunnan Province where Keuka College has a partner university. He's from that city and has some close contacts there."

Matt has been in Shanghai now for a year and a half where he was helping another wine importer do on-trade distribution. "We're in talks with some famous 5-star hotels and with some independent restaurants. Finger Lakes wines will be relatively new to the country. We're talking with a couple more area wineries that are interested in exploring China, too," he adds.

Matt has been bringing back various Finger Lakes wines, opening them with some key opinion leaders. "The response has been overwhelmingly positive and I've been asked along the way when we'll have wine in the country. Now we can say, 'September 20!' as we got the first shipment sent out on Saturday. We were so excited to see that wine take off in the shipping container. It's now just a count down until I get to uncork a few bottles in Shanghai and help spread the

region's name to some fascinated consumers.”

FLX International has already received orders for cases of wine, and places have opened on wine lists in the famous Shanghai French Concession.

It's not been easy, though. Matt says it took a long time to get all the licenses needed to wholesale wine and working with the freight forwarders in China to get the wine on a container ship.

“The wineries we are representing, however, have been a real joy to work with,” says Matt. “We admire their curiosity in exploring new markets, and in China specifically. They are well positioned to be the first in the market and we are working diligently to protect their brand, their ethos, and their family wine making traditions.”

He adds that China is a newcomer when it comes to drinking grape wines, “But they are quickly catching up and some of the sommeliers I deal with in Shanghai are some of the finest in the world. In fact, the former Senior Sommelier from the Four Seasons in Pudong (part of Shanghai) who now lives and works in London at a famous restaurant was really eager to put Finger Lakes wines on her wine list. She's placed top in several international sommelier competitions, and she will be one of the most respected in the world within the decade. Having her approval of the region's wine was a good indicator that China was ready for a relatively small wine region's wine.”

Matt took a bottle of wine once to the “hub of wine” in Shanghai. “It's a local wine bar where the who's who of the wine scene in the city hang out and pass around bottles of interesting finds. One of the guys I hang around with was ranked ‘China's Blind Wine Tasting Champion’ a few years back, and he has an incredible palate. I took a few bottles of Riesling from Germany, Australia, Italy, France, and the Finger Lakes. I covered them up and blind tested him on the wines. I didn't tell him which countries were being poured, or even the grape. I simply told them they were all one grape variety. After tasting them all, I asked him what they were. He guessed them all right except the Finger Lakes, which he guessed was a German Riesling. It was also his favorite. It was such a rewarding little test from what we're working with here and how they are suited for export markets in Asia which is what we're trying to do,” he explains.

Matt has studied and lived in Asia over the past seven years with extended trips back home. He appreciates what's going on in that half of the world. "I knew I wanted to stay in Asia a bit, but I also wanted to keep one foot in Asia and one foot home. Who knew it would lead us to wine, and who knew the wine would be so well-received? It's truly exciting!" he exclaims.

As FLX International starts to work on a second shipment for the fall, they are intent on getting the finest Finger Lakes wines into the best places in China. "Once we get this rolling," says Matt, "we're looking ahead to other Asian markets as their economies grow and their preferences develop. It's an exciting time to be in the business, that's for sure."

The McFetridges wish to credit many who helped get this new venture started: Tammy Peppin at Assemblyman Phil Palmesano's office, who helped get some quick answers on trade requirements with China; Mike Westfall from Church Creative Flooring and Michael Carmel for loading the wines; and the FLEDC for helping all along the way. Susan Spence at the N.Y. Wine and Grape Foundation "has been a joy to work with as well," says Matt. Spence hosted a troupe of consumers interested in Finger Lakes wines this past spring with the USDA office in Shanghai's "Women of Wine" program. Matt connected the USDA Shanghai directory with Spence last fall, and they put a program together. "Since then, we've been receiving emails from numerous interested parties who are looking to get some Finger Lakes wines. This town and region have some wonderful people who have foresight and care to see what we can share to others around the world.

"It's an exciting time for the region's wine as domestic critics rank us in the top of the country's wineries," says Matt, "and an exciting time for the region as we explore China. It took a few years, but as an adult, I have come to truly appreciate everything the area offers. I'm so lucky to do what we're doing and I just hope we can make the region proud for years to come!"

