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SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 2017

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ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 2017 / OFFICE OF SPECIAL REGISTRATION / P000004

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# TRADITION MEETS NEW TERRITORY



## Gaggenau's 3rd edition of the Sommelier Awards

The leading luxury brand for professional-grade home appliances, Gaggenau, is currently organising its prestigious Sommelier Awards, which will take place next autumn in Beijing, the cultural capital of China. The competition, which is devised to encourage gifted up-and-coming sommeliers, is part of Gaggenau's ambition to shape conditions and educate wine aficionados all over the world. The 334-year-old brand is a pioneer in China when it comes to reinforcing the delicate and profound sommelier profession and supporting this emerging interest.

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The awards competition took place in Vienna last year, where five international candidates were challenged to demonstrate their knowledge of wine, coffee, and cuisine. Two full days were filled with challenges, including tasting exams, professional competency tests, and the presentation of a personal beverage selection for a five-course dinner served by the young, three-Gault-Millau-toques winning chef, Harald Irka, in the baroque Palais Liechtenstein. A private piano recital by jury member and

world-class pianist Zhao Yinyin was the cherry on the cake. The former Silver Trophy laureate, Tansy Zhao, currently working as chief sommelier for Noble Spirits in Shanghai, cherishes those wonderful memories: "It was the first time a Chinese sommelier received such an award in an international sommelier competition. There were many congratulations from people in the wine and hospitality industry, which provided me with great encouragement."

Giovanni Dolfi of Fattorie dei Dolfi, sampling the wine directly from the barrel to determine its status within the ageing process, so as to decide whether the wine is ready to bottle or not



25-year-old German sommelier Marc Almert won the Gold trophy (middle), followed by Tansy Zhao from China and Norbert Dudziński from Poland, who received the Silver and Bronze, respectively.



Gaggenau Sommelier Awards 2016 Wine-pairing dinner / Every contestant had to match a wine to each of the five courses



Meiyu Li, sommelier and wine consultant / She has witnessed not only the development of her profession in China, but also the emergence of the wine market there.

On the occasion of the previous edition, Sven Schnee, Head of Global Brand Gaggenau, declared that "While many other acclaimed brands focus on chefs, designers, architects, and other makers possessing star quality, Gaggenau chose to laud the sommeliers – those dedicated, skilled professionals who explain which wine would best complement our meal, and who – despite their curatorial role – usually operate in the chef's shadow." This quote inspired us to ask the 2016 winner, 26-year-old German, Marc Almert, whether we could compare the sommelier in a restaurant with the drummer in a rock band: the backbone of the machine whose performance is critical to the whole enterprise but who usually isn't in the spotlight. And above all, how it feels to suddenly be put on the international stage by Gaggenau. "Ha-ha, not a bad comparison... Yes, a sommelier typically remains in the background; it certainly feels a bit peculiar when the spotlight is on us because we come from a service position and being humble is a key characteristic of our job. Curiosity is another very important trait, though: the eagerness to find out about a beverage, a cuisine, a coffee; to visit places, and to taste. Equally important is providing a good service to the customers, because, in the end, it's all about them. But although we're not in the foreground, a good sommelier adds to the success of a restaurant, together with the entire team."

Comparisons aside, both laureates find it crucial that a top brand like Gaggenau chooses to honour the sommelier. "The company has a long, rich tradition and an interesting cultural background", Almert explains. "Being a sommelier is a traditional role with a lengthy history as well – it's believed that the origins of contemporary sommeliers date back to the Middle Ages, when the Royal Courts would bring a servant with them who would make sure there was enough bread, wine, and other provisions, and who would taste the fare before the nobles did." Sommeliers and Gaggenau seem to be perfect bedfellows. "We consider them top professionals and excellent cultural ambassadors of wine culture that contribute to a sophisticated lifestyle", Schnee nods. As part of his prize, Almert received a top-notch training and mentoring session with judges Annemarie Foidl and Serge Dubs at one of Europe's leading independent artisan vineyards, Fattorie dei Dolfi in Tuscany. Owner Giovanni Dolfi, a low-yield producer of high-quality wines, proved to be an excellent host. Almert then went on to become Gaggenau's global cultural ambassador, with one of his official duties being 'to further promote the culinary arts'.



Wine barrels from Fattorie dei Dolfi's ageing cellar

In China, there is no such thing as a sommelier tradition, assures Meiyu Li, an acknowledged sommelier and wine consultant at Park Hyatt Beijing, who also held position of judge at the Gaggenau Sommelier Awards China preliminary contest in 2016. "The work of a sommelier is very new to China; we don't have an ancient tradition like in Europe. It was only about seven or eight years ago that the profession was introduced into the market here." Which is when Meiyu Li came back to China, having spent many years studying and training in France and other parts of Europe. She arrived with many awards and prizes, and was thus amongst the first generation of sommeliers there. Meiyu Li has witnessed not only the development of her profession in her home country, but also the emergence of the wine market. "Making wine in China has a considerable history, but making quality wine is new. Serious people are now trying their best to make good wine – for example, Ma Shusen, a pioneer who has been investing in his Chateau Amethyst winery in Huailai county, Hebei province [considered to be one of the best winemaking regions in China] for nine years." The Chinese market is growing up. Since opening its borders, foreigner visitors and Chinese who have studied abroad have brought new tastes and knowhow into the country. "More and more, young people are becoming interested in wine and even want to become sommeliers themselves, especially in Shanghai. This generation is particularly eager – some universities organise wine-tastings and these are super popular."

It is clear: a huge new market has been born. And Gaggenau understands. Long gone is the time that China was best known for making cheap, lousy copies of Western products. The China of today is increasingly investing in quality, innovation, and creativity. And wine is a large part of this evolution. "If you want to convince the growing market, you have to offer excellent quality", Meiyu Li says. "If not, people will go for imported wines from Chile or Europe that are nice and not too expensive. With China coming into the market, there is a lot of competition, which is good for the consumer. People realise that to make money you need passion and dedication."



Mark Almert, 2016 winner of the Gaggenau Sommelier Awards



One of Europe's leading independent artisan vineyards, Fattorie dei Dolfi in Tuscany, where Mark Almert received top-notch training as part of his prize

This dedication is crucial for a sommelier too. "A good sommelier offers a good service, makes an excellent selection of wines, and is able to train a dream team. All of this can provide a restaurant or hotel with a true reference, and as a result, business will flourish", Meiyu Li says cheerfully. "And you have to have passion. Because it's a tough job with long hours and is not incredibly well paid, so without passion you won't last. This also means that you need to have the drive and curiosity to keep learning, because wine culture might be old but there are many developments and innovations going on. You have to keep pace with all this, as well as with the culture, tradition, and values connected with wine." Meiyu Li gained first-hand experience in how deeply this runs when she decided to study winemaking and become a sommelier, influenced by a lecture on Burgundy that she once attended in Paris. "Before I got in touch with wine, I was a different person. Since then, I've become so much more open minded, eager to learn languages, meet people from different cultures, and curious to know more. I started to study Italian in order to learn more about Italian wines. It's not only about the wine in the glass, it's about the *terroir*, the geography, language, tradition, and history.

As Schnee says: "The Chinese have been into wine for a couple of centuries now, but the sommelier culture is not yet established there. These Awards are part of our ambition to shape conditions and educate wine aficionados all over the world; therefore, holding the next edition in China makes perfect sense. We will merge the precious viniculture with the

impressive millennia-long cultural richness of China, where craftsmanship is very important. So we are giving the country a platform in order to encourage this. It's all about passion and about amazing individuals who make it happen. There are no limits to that." The people are indeed experiencing an eagerness to connect, to learn, to taste. Meiyu Li confirms this, adding, "In short, it's an exciting moment to be in China, and what's more, to be a sommelier in China!" We can only agree with this and look forward to the upcoming Gaggenuau Sommelier Awards.



As part of his training, Marc Almert spent a day with master perfumer Sileno Cheloni at Aqualfor Firenze. Together they explored the relationship between fragrance and taste.

**The International Gaggenuau Sommelier Awards are taking place in Beijing, China in autumn 2018, with local competitions held in the first half of 2018.**