

Myanmar's first wines go down well

Critics praise vintages produced by German entrepreneur in military state

■ MYANMAR

Associated Press in Aythaya

The landscape could be mistaken for the rolling, sun-drenched hills of Tuscany. But the monasteries perched on hilltops are Buddhist, and the workers aren't Italians with centuries of viticulture coursing through their veins, but Asian farmers new to the grape at Myanmar's first winery.

Started by a German entrepreneur, the Aythaya estate has been producing reds, whites and roses since 2004 and is preparing to increase output and quality, with exports on the horizon.

They are among the latest, so-called "new latitude wines", springing up outside the industry's traditional heartland in places as far afield as Brazil, India and Thailand, where vintners hope one day to match the excellence of the classics.

"Had I not been convinced that we can make a quality wine in our mountains. I would not have started the project," said Bert Morsbach, who had to tread on viticulturally uncharted terrain and faced political risks in a military-run country shunned by many foreign investors.

"That was a gamble, I must admit," he said. "But so far the government has been very co-operative and it looks as if this is going to stay that way."

Having started several successful enterprises in Southeast Asia-he pioneered sailboarding in Thailand- Mr Morsbach in 1997 hatched the idea of making wines in Myanmar. Experts concurred that the project has a "high survival chance".

Experimentation followed on various vines- mainly from France, Germany and Italy-and a site was selected in hills above Inle Lake of Shan State in eastern Myanmar.

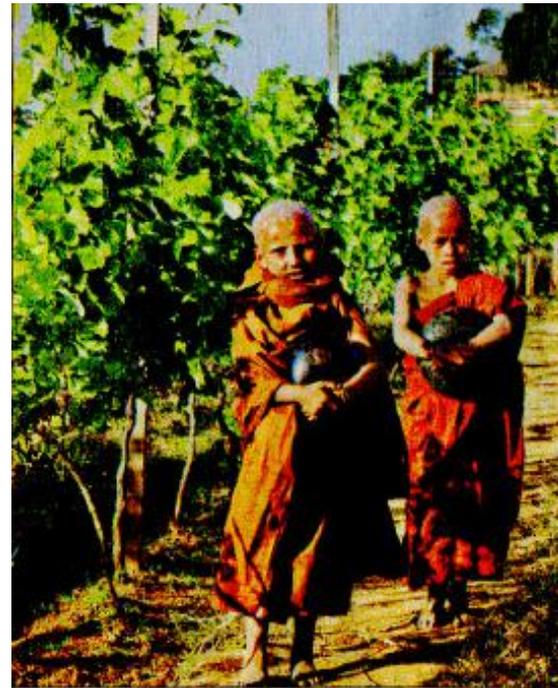
Mr Morsbach, originally a mining engineer from Dusseldorf, and his chief winemaker, Hans Leiendecker, say growing conditions on their 9.5 hectare vineyard are excellent, with the lime stone soil not unlike that found in Tuscany and southern France and a climate similar to California's wine country.

The rainfall is moderate and the 1,300 metre elevation, making Aythaya probably the highest vineyard in Asia, brings cool temperatures that can fall to as low as 5 degree Celsius on a winter night.

"A huge asset in our favor, 150 days of sunshine," Mr Morsbach adds.

While Aythaya's wines aren't about to knock the Romanee-Contis or Mouton Rothschilds of this world off the shelves, they have received some good reviews.

One Thailand-based wine critic, David Swartzentruber, wrote of its 2004 sauvignon blanc; "This wine produced in Asia that



Novice monks walk through the vineyards of the Aythaya estate, the first winery in Myanmar. Their monastery is supported by the winery.

Photo: AP

possesses all the attributes of a good Bordeaux white."

Another wine expert in Thailand, James Mullen, praises the 2006 rose', noting its "flower notes with a touch of sweetness, perfect balance and perfect finish".

From the Italian Moscato grape, rose' is the winery's top seller, regarded as most appropriate to a tropical climate and the best partner to Myanmar curries and other Asian food.

"For Asian we are at a good quality level. For Europe it's not good enough yet, but the potential is here," said Mr Leiendecker.