

Bulgaria - the good, the bad and the ugly

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My first wine trip to Bulgaria was both fascinating and frustrating. I could see that my fellow travellers, young drinks writers from Bulgarian wine's principal export markets in northern Europe, were quite shocked by some of what we saw.

Used to gleaming ranks of stainless steel tanks in Australian techno mode, they had to rearrange their faces when confronted with the sixties- Soviet- style of winery which still predominates in Bulgaria. The dingy halls full of concrete vats and pipes of dubious cleanliness, rusting metal, broken window panes and over- womanned, snail's pace bottling lines presented an unrecognisably retro face of wine production to them. For me this was a flashback to my early days of wine writing in the 1970s, and not so unlike some southern French wine cellars today.

But against this background there has been considerable investment in wineries in Bulgaria, for with its reliably warm summers and considerable plantings of international grape varieties there is no reason why it should not be an important source of good- value, exportable wine.

In the 1980s Bulgarian Cabernet Sauvignon at two pounds a bottle was a favourite at British dinner parties, sometimes served from a decanter to avowed claret lovers who were none the wiser. But Andropov's vine pull scheme, followed by Gorbachev's attempts to sober up the Russians were disastrous for the Bulgarian wine business and left hundreds of vineyards untended for lack of a market for their produce.

Just as destructive has been Bulgaria's much more recent agricultural restitution programme whereby land, usually in inconveniently small lots, has been handed back to the descendants of the original owners, many of whom are city dwellers with neither interest nor expertise in farming it. The medium- sized agricultural coops of the communist regime were much more efficient than the current system which leaves vast tracts of Bulgarian farmland (with a particularly colourful ecosystem thanks to lack of cash for agrochemicals) effectively unfarmed. Far too many vineyards have been left to fend for themselves with missing vines and too many leaves to ripen the grapes properly.

This is a sad state of affairs for a country that in the early 1980s was exporting almost as much wine as Germany (and 30 times as much as Australia was then). After the collapse of the Soviet market, Britain has been the most important market for Bulgarian wine. Imports reached a peak in 1996/7 but are now sliding fast.

The problem is not just that Bulgarian winemakers (who have traditionally been quite divorced from grape growers) now have to contend with a dubious grape supply but that the global grape glut has made the bottom end of the market very much more competitive. Britain's largest supermarket Tesco can now offer a red bordeaux and basic Californian red more cheaply than any Bulgarian counterpart. Its rival Sainsbury's has reduced its Bulgarian range from 16 to nine lines in the last six years. As Sainsbury's buyer Andrew Bird says, 'Bulgaria used to be the place you went for a £2.99 red but now there isn't a country in the world that doesn't do a £2.99 red and white. It doesn't have that point of difference any more.'

The dominant importer of Bulgarian wine into the UK, Domaine Boyar, is responding with some un- ignorable packaging innovations. The company's EBRD- financed Blueridge winery outside Sliven is Bulgaria's only thoroughly modern wine operation, complete with Australian- trained winemaker. Familiar sights at last for my travelling companions.

There has been relatively little foreign investment in Bulgarian wine, especially relative to the flood of western capital into the Tokaji region of Hungary. But Australian Lou Ghirardello, Deutsche Bank's global head of money markets in London, has mustered a syndicate to invest in the Svishtov winery, and its unusually extensive vineyards, on the northern border. Stork Nest Estates is the chosen brand for external consumption.

Château Menada is the equivalent for the Polish- backed Belvedere operation which owns two wineries but is particularly interested in their distillates. Bulgarian wineries routinely produce spirits as well as wine - in fact liquids called whisky, whiskey and 'cereal alcohol drink' are all offered by the old- fashioned Assenovgrad winery which has had the vision to instal a Swedish- backed ultra- modern micro- winery within the compound. In this time- capsule winemaker Lars Torstenson of Domaine Rabiega in Provence is teaching them all how 21st century wine is made.

Miroglio of Alba, a Piemontese textile enterprise, has recently bought into Bulgarian wine and will be planting Italian grape varieties which will inject much- needed variety in to the current grape mix. Cabernet, Merlot and Chardonnay currently dominate and there is a shortage of the Assenovgrad speciality Mavrud which can make particularly robust, characterful and uniquely Bulgarian reds. The Swedes are also keen on the perfumed Rubin, a specifically Bulgarian crossing of Syrah and Nebbiolo according to local lore.

There is also some Italian investment in the Damianitza winery almost on the Greek border in the south- west of the country where the indigenous red Melnik grape can be delicious and where Marc Dworkin of Château Bellefont Belcier in Bordeaux has fashioned a dramatic Merlot called ReDark.

Dworkin is also involved in the 250- acre vineyard project of Stefan von Neipperg, of St- Emilion, west of Plovdiv. He should be picking his first Syrah grapes, still very much a novelty in Bulgaria, this September.

This operation is likely to be as heartening as two other small but bright lights on the horizon of Bulgarian wine. Ivo Genowski is a wine importer in Berlin but to judge from the results, he has clearly put a great deal of effort into his new Santa Sara Bulgarian reds, one of which walked off with top prize in a major blind- tasting competition we visitors judged in Sofia.

Like Bulgarian Ivan Todoroff who is using some of his income from the construction business to make a range of world- class reds at his Todoroff Wine Cellar in the wine village of Brestovitsa, Genowski is careful to keep a tight rein on his grape supply. Todoroff apologised for being late for my visit to his cute little winery and tourist centre; he had been concluding the purchase of 66 hectares/160 acres of vineyard.

Quite how he achieved such an enviably large area was not explained. Many of the larger wineries, typically acquired by the previous management, are recognising that grapes are more important than the oak that has recently preoccupied them. Like Vini Sliven and Vinex Slavyantsi they will have to plant their own vineyards to achieve control over grape quality. But purchasing land, even at just 500 euros a hectare, can be a painstaking business involving chasing up hundreds of absentee owners.

Once vines are better managed, grapes achieve full ripeness, and real fruit is returned to Bulgarian wines, they should regain their position as one of this beautiful country's key exports.