Bulgaria

7 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Exportable international varietals but some pockets of individuality are emerging.
Main grapes: Pamid, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Mavrud, Melnik (red); Rkatsiteli, Aligoté, Chardonnay (white).

With much less promising raw materials than Hungary, but a similar commercial climate, Bulgaria managed a minor economic miracle in the 1970s and 1980s. Lacking a domestic wine market of any size, and sporting fewer exciting indigenous varieties, what was then the Bulgarian state wine monopoly successfully sold most of its basic wine to the Soviet Union and systematically planted the varieties it somehow knew it could sell, in vast quantities, to the British market: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Traminer and Riesling.

Of these, the full-throttle, somewhat rustic but recognisable blackcurrant-flavoured Bulgarian Cabernet Sauvignon was by far the most successful, to such an extent that at one point Bulgaria was a serious exporter of wine to the UK. Thanks to a deal with Pepsico, California winemaking expertise was exchanged for cola. In the mid 1980s the state-controlled Bulgarian wine industry, bolstered by huge and regular orders from the Soviet Union, seemed in good shape.

But Gorbachev's anti-alcohol measures were immediately reflected in neglected vineyards left to grow wild, or at most produce poor quality wine. Total wine production in 1990 was only a quarter as much as in 1985, despite buoyant sales in Britain.

During the 1990s, state-owned wineries were privatised and some attracted overseas investment. The biggest improvement during that period came as quality-minded producers, most notably Suhindol and Stork Nest Estates in the north and Haskovo in the south, began to invest in their own vineyards and bring vineyard and winery closer together.

The Bulgarian wine industry is slowly trying to reconstruct itself in the entirely new economic climate into which it has been propelled. Winemaking discipline, hygiene and equipment are still more important factors in determining whether a Bulgarian wine is likely to suit a western palate than the natural conditions in whichthe grapes were grown. Many of the older wineries such as Assenovgrad in the south were built, Soviet style, effectively as bottling and distribution centres close to cities rather than vineyards (although Assenovgrad has produced a run of excitingly rich, age-worthy Mavrud). Wineries such as Vinprom Rousse close to the Romanian border to the north, Preslav on the Black Sea hinterland in the east and Sliven on the Balkan foothills had been relatively successfully modernised. Hopeful non-Bulgarian investors include the Italian textile baron Edoardo Miroglio, French distribution company Belvedere and Bordeaux sophisticate Stephan von Neipperg, who has invested in Enira in the Bessa Valley. Terra Tangra in the Sakar mountains near the Turkish border in the far south are producing some impressive and ambitious reds from organically grown grapes.

I have yet to taste a white Bulgarian wine that I would buy - most are very pale renditions of the variety specified, both 'international' and the local grapey Misket, Aligoté and Rkatsiteli imported from Russia and Fetiaska (sic) imported from Romania. As I write, however, there is doubtless a stunning barrel-fermented Chardonnay just waiting to be bottled... The best whites come from the cooler north east but more recent plantings of of Sauvignon Blanc in the Sakar mountains look promising. Bulgarian reds, on the other hand, can be great value. There has been an inadvisable love affair with oak chips and I am not entirely convinced by some Bulgarian wineries' determination to make soft, plummy, light, fruity blends of such varieties as Merlot and Pinot Noir, Merlot and Gamza (the Bulgarian name for Hungary's Kadarka), and Merlot and Pamid (Bulgaria's least exciting native red grape), but there is undoubtedly some well-made, absurdly inexpensive Cabernet Sauvignon, Mavrud - and Melnik, the impressive speciality of the eponymous town near the Greek border from which Damianitza have made some interesting wines.

Individual, quality-minded operations that have made at least some superior wine include Bessa Valley, Stefan von Niepperg of St-Émilion's enterprise, Italian industrialist Edoardo Miroglio's efforts with Pinot Noir in the south east of the country, Todoroff, and Santa Sarah.

Bulgaria’s accession to the EU in 2007 prompted the creation of a new and complex quality wine scheme but Bulgaria has still a long way to go to win back its export markets.