Romania

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In a nutshell: Seriously underdeveloped.

Main grapes: Feteasca Alba, Feteasca Regala, Welschriesling, Tamiioasa (white); Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot (red).

Romania has great potential for varied and high quality wine production, but it is unlikely to be fully realised for many years. The country has a greater area of vineyard than any other in eastern Europe, and the sweet white wines of Cotnari in the north east were as famous as Tokaj and Constantia in their day.

Romania is also, unlike Hungary and Bulgaria, a wine-drinking country. It lies on the same latitude as France, even if its climate is more dramatically continental (although winters tend to be much less harsh on the Black Sea coast in the east).

Romania boasts that it has considerably more Cabernet Sauvignon planted than Bulgaria (which has had such success with exporting the variety) but the chief grape varieties are the indigenous white Feteasca a twentieth-century crossing Feteasca Regala and the red Festeasca Neagra. They yield aromatic wines which vary enormously in sweetness level and quality. Welschriesling (the variety behind Banat Riesling from the far west of the country), Aligoté and Merlot are other important varieties, although there are also considerable acreages of Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, Rkatsiteli, Muscat Ottonel, Traminer and the native Romanian Grasq and Tqmaîioasq which were responsible for Cotnari.

The atmospheric, wooded hills of Transylvania in the middle of the country are the source of many, potentially haunting white wines, notably in the Tirnave, or Tarnave, region. Other geographical names to have escaped the country on the mere 15 per cent of wine production that is exported include Murfatlar on the coast, which has a certain reputation for sweet wines (a Romanian speciality), and Dealu Mare on the Carpathian foothills north of Bucharest, which can turn out some superior red wines, including some rather soupy but very inexpensive Blaufränkisch, once thought to be Pinot Noir. Davino has developed a following for their reds from Dealu Mare based on Feteasca Neagra.

For the moment, however, Romania's wine producers suffer like all Romanians from the chronic shortages of the materials and equipment that are considered commonplace in the west, notably refrigeration to control fermentation temperatures and to store bottled wine safely. It remains to be seen whether Romania’s accession to the EU in 2007 will be of ultimate benefit to its wine industry.