

Wine in Egypt

17 May 2009 by Jancis Robinson

With this contribution to our occasional Travel tips, we begin a week with a focus on Africa. Julia will pick up the baton with a series of fascinating articles and videos on South Africa, source of some great wine value today.

Longstanding visitors to this site may remember my reporting on a wonderful first-time trip to Egypt with Nick and our youngest back in 2005. As outlined in [The unfinished Obelisk](#), the only drawback was the one I expected, which, I have to confess, was partly responsible for my never having visited this extraordinary country before: the dire quality of Egyptian wine.

I got quite excited therefore when Karim Hwaidak of Sahara Vineyards emailed me last month to explain that he had been hired by Egypt's dominant wine producer Gianaclis to produce a superior range of wine with them. Although a German Egyptian based in Tuscany, he has apparently planted 30 different wine grape varieties in a 150-acre vineyard in the Egyptian desert 50 km outside Cairo and 450 acres near the ancient and much-visited city of Luxor. It can't have been easy to establish vines in the desert but he tells the story on the stunning and comprehensive www.saharavineyards.com website from which the image below is taken.

He began by planting 20 acres in 2004. In 2005 he was approached by Gianaclis (owned by the Heineken group), who produce a total of about eight million bottles of wine a year. As he puts it, 'the quality of Egyptian wines is not very high. Wines are produced mainly from concentrate and from imported grapes, mainly out of Lebanon and South Africa. I sell the majority of my yearly grape production to Gianaclis. Only the best grapes go into my own wines.

'I produced my first wine in 2007, it was a blend of Viognier and Chardonnay. In 2008 I increased my production to 60,000 bottles, 40,000 of Caspar white wines and 20,000 of Nermine red wine (Caspar and Nermine are the names of my children). The red wine, which is a blend of Syrah and Carignan, will come on the market in 2009. The white wines are a pure Viognier, a pure Chenin Blanc, and a Blanc de Noirs made from Grenache Noir grapes.

'I have my own production facility within the Gianaclis plant. The winemaker is French and my consultants are Mas Martinet from Priorat in Spain. The consultants come at least once per month to Egypt to supervise the work in the vineyard and in the cellar. During harvest and fermentation the visits are more frequent.'

He sent me samples of his first three wines, all 2008s. In fact, the history of our encounter is detailed in my article on the [Ethics of wine writing](#).

They are absolutely beautifully packaged, and come with some extremely smart publicity material - and a But. I'm afraid the liquids themselves are not going to set the non-Egyptian world on fire - yet. They still seem to have a little hint of what spoil the Egyptian wines I tried four years ago. So much so that I wonder about the condition of, and materials used for, the vats, tanks and pipes in the winery.

Caspar Chenin Blanc 2008 Egypt 14.5 Drink 2009

Produced by Gianaclis for Sahara Vineyards, which are run from Petroio, Tuscany. A hint of those very odd metallic aromas I remember from my only trip to Egypt a few years ago. Off-dry. A bit watery. Much better on the palate - fairly fresh fruit - than on the nose. Though on the finish there's a hint of that metal taint.

Caspar Viognier 2008 Egypt 15 Drink 2009

Soft and rather flabby and watery on the nose. Sweet start and some gas in there to give it zip. Lemony fruit and vaguely floral. I think I'd be very happy to drink this on the Nile, though certainly wouldn't seek it out abroad. Slightly sickly finish. 12.5%

Caspar Blanc de Noirs 2008 Egypt 15.5 Drink 2009

Firm and positive. Not much flavour but good balance and lots of gas. 13.5%

Bravo to Mr Hwaidak for making the effort to improve the quality of Egyptian wines. I'm sure tourists in Egypt have reason to thank him heartily, and I see no reason why eventually the wines will not be of interest on export markets too. He has

already shown them at Prowein and last week's London Wine Trade Fair and will be at Vinexpo in Bordeaux next month.