Turkey - some background

1 Jun 2009 by Jancis Robinson

I'll be publishing my overview of modern Turkish wine on Saturday in the *Financial Times* and in Free for all, and tasting notes on more than 80 of the better wines on Thursday. In the meantime however, here are some broad brushstroke observations. There'll be a couple of videos of my visit to the wine-producing island of Bozcaada tomrorrow.

The main **wine regions** are Thrace, the European bit of Turkey to the west and north of Istanbul; the mild Aegean coast and its hinterland; around Tokat north of the capital Ankara; Cappadocia in central Anatolia which has traditions and a volcanic landscape all of its own (see picture); eastern Anatolia with its proximity and similarity to Georgia and Armenia; and south eastern Anatolia which borders Iran. All of these are extremely different, with vines in continental Anatolia needing to be banked up every winter to protect them from freezing - indeed vines on the island of Bozcaada near the Dardanelles are budding just as those in Cappadocia have their winter lagging/banked up earth removed.

Foreign wine and vine **consultants** are now common in Turkey with the two biggest companies, Doluca and Kavaklidere (whose production capacity is put at 18 million litres a year but which has been reducing production as cheaper wine **imports** are now allowed in Turkey), recruiting expertise from Australia and France respectively.The old state monopoly Tekel, sold for a fortune by some of Turkey's most prominent business families to Texas Pacific Group in 2004, is now called Mey and has Kayra as its principal wine brand, with an American consultant, Daniel O'Donnell.

I heard the story from one large producer that when they go buying grapes in parts of the more strictly **Muslim** countryside, the growers are unwilling to be too obviously identified with wine production so the transaction has to be effected with, for example, the local butcher acting for the growers. But when the time comes for the company to communicate with the growers and tell them when they will be in the village to pick up the grapes, the announcement has to be made from the minaret of the local mosque as that is the most effective means of communication.

Although the emergence of a new generation of private 'boutique' wineries is slowly changing this, there is still a marked gulf between the activities of **growing vines** and making wines. It is customary in Turkey for producers to buy grapes and truck them for long distances, sometimes more than 1,000 km, particularly from eastern Anatolia, without much regard for the ambient temperature - even in some of the wines selling for £30 or £40 a bottle on the Turkish market. Bushvines predominate, but so do high yields. All vineyard work is done by hand.

There are no **wine laws** in Turkey, so any producer can claim more or less anything on the label.

In general, I was told, Turkish wine drinkers are more likely to revere **New World** wines than European - and certainly most of the imported wine is inexpensive Chilean and Argentine, with a smattering of Italian.

Talking of which, Piero Antinori has been to Turkey more than once to investigate **foreign investment** in vineyards there - and has been followed by the Frescobaldi.

The aniseed spirit **raki** is much more important in Turkey than wine and now there are producers of this other than Mey. The new Idol label has close ties to raki production. But only 13 million of the 70 million Turks drink alcohol at all, and average per capita consumption of wine is just one litre a year with perhaps 40% of this amount accounted for by **tourists** . Many of these tourists are on all-inclusive packages so do not present great opportunities for the new wave of more expensive Turkish wines.

Wine **exports** are very limited although larger companies may send some wine to Turkish restaurants in countries such as the UK, US, France and, especially, Germany which has a sizeable Turkish population.

See my tasting notes and my overview on Saturday but know that Turkish wine **packaging** is pretty smart and, unlike its Greek counterpart with its own alphabet, relatively easy to decipher.