From (almost) Russia with love

1 Oct 2009 by Jancis Robinson

I'm sitting in Vienna airport on my way home from a most surprising trip to the winelands on Russia's Black Sea coast. The most surprising thing of all was how unexpectedly normal everything was there. I mean the social fabric, the look of the city, towns, villages and roads, as well as the look of the vineyards and much of the cellars I inspected in detail.

I'd recorded a little second episode of TV Jancis in this airport on my way out, making much of a newspaper headline I'd seen the week before claiming 'Terror stalks Russia's deep south'. After all, the stretch of Black Sea coast I was bound for was very close to the border with Georgia, with whom Russia had such a major spot of military bother so recently, and not that far from war-torn Chechnya. I was also made a bit nervous by the experiences of a fellow hack who had joined a group of visiting British wine writers invited to Georgia a day late and found herself invited into the wrong car at the airport and effectively kidnapped.

But after only a little time in Russia, I could see that this was desperately inappropriate. Life there is completely recognisable to any western European. In fact night-time Krasnodar is considerably more peaceful than night-time London.

And the wines being made by an increasing number of ambitious producers there are also completely recognisable (the 120 relics in a special Soviet wine museum less so). But I will be writing far more about all this later. Now, I'd better not miss my plane to Heathrow...

Just one little hangover from the Soviet regime perhaps is the name touted on this sign next to Fanagoria's top vineyard, full of virus-free vines specially imported from France: Special Elite (the bit just above 'Basis').