

FT Magazine Wine

Wine from Ethiopia, Ukraine...where next?

‘Every time I encounter a new wine-producing region or country, I see it as proof of how widely my wonder and excitement are shared’

Jancis Robinson MAY 1 2021

The most admired classic wines are great but, heavens, life would be boring if they were the only wines available. I love making discoveries. Unfamiliar names remind me just how miraculous it is that the fermented juice of a single fruit can offer such variety and stimulation. Every time I encounter a new wine-producing region or country, I see it as proof of how widely my wonder and excitement are shared.

I had heard that Ethiopia (along with at least another 11 African countries) produced wine but had never tasted it until someone, who seemed to be a coffee trader judging by his email address, offered to send me some last month. Six bottles of Rift Valley wine eventually made their way through the obstacle course that wine samples have to navigate post-Brexit. They were all made from familiar international grape varieties, which somewhat diminished their mystique, but the fact that two of them carried no vintage year, while the rest were labelled 2018 and seemed rather younger than that, was certainly unusual. As was the odour of dirty dishcloths I picked up on one or two of the reds.

But the two Ethiopian Chardonnays were excellent by any measure. They all come from an operation run by Castel, which established vineyards and a winery south of Addis Ababa in 2007. An elevation of 1,600m helps counteract the low latitude by guaranteeing cool nights. Were I to find myself in Ethiopia, I would head for Rift Valley Chardonnays, though I’m not sure that export markets desperately need them.

Lately wines from Azerbaijan have come my way for the first time thanks to an online tasting, organised by the country’s tourist board, entitled Secrets of the Silk Road. Wine, we were assured by the organiser, is “a driver of cultural and societal diplomacy” — and indeed diplomatic channels were used to avoid that dratted obstacle course.

The three wines featured had been supplied by producer Chabiant and were made in the Ismayilli region, which is overlooked by the snowy Caucasus. We were told that, while winters are very cold here, summers are warm enough for grapes to ripen as high as 800m (500m is the conventional limit). The vineyards also benefit from cooling breezes off the Caspian Sea.

Unlike Ethiopia, Azerbaijan can boast indigenous grape varieties: fairly neutral but crisp Bayan Shira for whites and thick-skinned Madrasa for reds. There is clearly serious potential for Madrasa. Like the other central Asian republics, Azerbaijan was once an important source of wine (much of it sweet red) for the Soviet Union, but the wines I tasted seemed to constitute a serious attempt to put Azerbaijan on the international wine map. Wine diplomacy replacing the “caviar diplomacy”, of which the country has previously been accused, perhaps?

Wine from the Finger Lakes in upstate New York might not be exotic if you live in Manhattan, but it certainly is for European drinkers. These deep glacial lakes, combined with Lake Ontario to the north, make viticulture possible by prolonging winter and delaying spring growth, which minimises risk of frost; and in summer, they store warmth, which stretches grape ripening into autumn. So far, Riesling is clearly what the Finger Lakes do best and, in my experience, Red Newt is one of the most skilful producers of it.

Three Red Newt Rieslings are now imported to the UK. I tasted them in March immediately after Stefan Winter’s excellent dry German Rieslings from Rheinhessen and they stood up beautifully by comparison.

I tasted six wines from Ukraine very recently, handpicked by a Ukrainian wine writer who was keen to point out that her country’s vintners, unlike those in Georgia and Moldova, receive no government support. Much to my surprise, one of these modern Ukrainian wines was made from Timorasso, a cult white wine grape grown to a very limited extent in northern Italy. But the star of the show was another light, dry white made from Telti Kuruk, a grape the Ukrainians claim as their own, while acknowledging its Turkish origins. Alas, with the exception of Beykush, these Ukrainian wine producers seem to be still in the dark ages of wine packaging, favouring unnecessarily heavy bottles, up to 900g apiece, when ones weighing as little as 350g can do the job.

Modern Greek wine in all its glory is already far too well established to qualify as exotic but fine table wines from the vineyards of Cyprus are a relatively new phenomenon. Yet again, I was more impressed by the whites than the reds among the few I tasted lately. The island's white wine grape Xynisteri — the mainstay of the sticky, sweet, underpriced Commandaria that for years was Cyprus's best-known wine — appears to have been persuaded to produce some really sophisticated dry whites. Yet again, the most promising vineyard sites are the highest and coolest, with Kyperounda claiming to be the highest winery in Europe, at 1,140m above the eastern Mediterranean.

Most wine lovers now know that [wine in China](#) is a major phenomenon. Yet not that much of it is exported. Thanks to Oeno, an ambitious new wine merchant based in the City of London, it is now possible for Europeans to see what all the fuss is about in Emma Gao's Bordeaux-inspired reds from her family's Silver Heights winery in the province of Ningxia. Oeno is determined that its portfolio should not be limited to the classics. It doesn't yet feature wines from Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, New York state, Ukraine or Cyprus, but you never know.

Recommended exotic wines

- Rift Valley Chardonnay 2018 Ethiopia 13%. *About £13 MJ Wine Cellars, not yet in stock*
- Rift Valley, Cuvee Prestige Chardonnay 2018 Ethiopia 13%. *About £16 MJ Wine Cellars, not yet in stock*
- Red Newt, Dry Riesling 2016 Finger Lakes 13%. *£31.99 Museum Wines*
- Red Newt, Tango Oaks Vineyard Riesling 2013 Finger Lakes 10.6%. *£29.99 Handford*
- Red Newt, The Knoll Riesling 2016 Finger Lakes 13.2%. *£46.99 Handford*
- Shabo, Grande Reserve Saperavi 2015 Ukraine 13.3%. *£55.20 Hedonism*.
I have not tasted this but it seems to be the only modern Ukrainian wine available for retail in the UK, although Hedonism has previously stocked Beykush's seriously good Ukrainian dried-grape blend of Saperavi and Tempranillo.
- Zambartas Xynisteri 2020 Cyprus 13%. *£12.95 MJ Wine Cellars*
- Kyperounda, Petritis Xynisteri 2018 Cyprus 13.5%. *£13.68-£19.19 various independents*
- Vlassides, Alátes Xynisteri 2019 Cyprus 13.5%. *£19.95 MJ Wine Cellars*
- Zambartas Maratheftiko 2018 Cyprus 14.5%. *£19.95 MJ Wine Cellars*
- Silver Heights, Emma's Reserve 2017 China 14%. *£96 Oeno*

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