



YEAR



OF



DISCOVERY

With fascinating wines coming from the unlikelyst of places, 2015 has become the Year of Discovery in wine, with retailers in the vital position as gatekeepers between curious drinkers and bold new regions and grapes



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A funny thing happened on the way to 2016: Buoyed by two decades of steady growth in wine consumption, Americans are—finally(?)—getting it. After decades of wine suppliers, merchants and critics alike exhorting people to “drink what you like,” people are doing just that.

Consider some of the most dynamic wine-category upswings of late—Moscato, Malbec, Prosecco and Red Blends. What they have in common is simple, pure and powerful: they are being driven by consumers’ tastes. Not by critics’ ratings.

Sure, Cab and Chard are still ringing up sales, but so many other grapes and regions have entered Americans’ comfort zone. In Italy, think Sicily, Alto Adige and Campania. In France, the Loire, the Rhône and the South of France are stirring more emotions than Bordeaux. In Spain, Garnacha has jumped in recognition. Wines from New Zealand, Greece, Austria, South Africa and Portugal are on the tips of wine drinkers’ tongues. In California, blends and offbeat varietals are what have drinkers buzzing, as well as regions outside Napa and Sonoma; and Washington, Oregon and New York’s wine industries continue to hum.

Nailing wine trends to a specific year can be tricky, but we believe 2015 is a watershed year for American wine culture: Consumers’ curiosity, interest and open-mindedness on one hand are converging with wine’s incredibly vibrant and creative supply side on the other. The result is that 2015 is revealing itself as the Year of Discovery.

Making The Connection

America’s embrace of wine has never been more adventurous. And in turn, the Retailer has never been more vital. Wine merchants select and present wines from the fast-morphing global market, communicating the relative style, value and merit of all those new grapes, places and brands. Simply put, they connect that ever-expanding universe to those increasingly open-minded wine drinkers.

To mark this Year of Discovery, this article aims to capture how and why some of today’s most exciting wines are emerging from the least expected places—from Central and Eastern Europe to pockets in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, even from established regions where new techniques are in play.

Eager to expose their wines to a wider audience to carve out a niche in the global wine market, these producers have teamed up with a growing tier of inspired, specialty importers. While distribution is limited, and many of these wines may always reside in the realm of “esoterica,” they are important puzzle pieces for a comprehensive understanding of our global wine tradition. They are ideal for adding fresh appeal and differentiation to a wine program, and in many cases represent unparalleled value. These wines won’t be appearing on supermarket shelves any time soon—all the more reason that independent merchants should seek them out now, ahead of the curve.

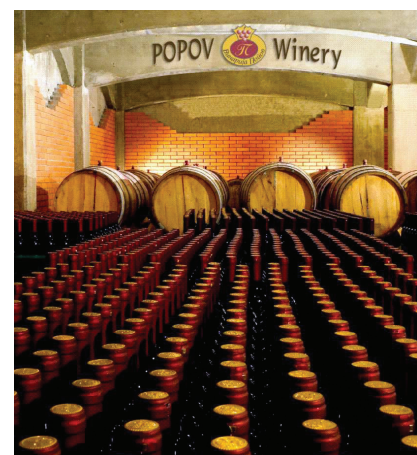


Chateau Kamnik

MACEDONIA

Macedonia, a country the size of Alabama, has made wine for over 400 years, but its sprint to modern-day fame began just 15 years ago.

The winery Bovin, established in 1998—seven years after the country’s split with Yugoslavia—changed the paradigm. Bovin pushed high quality to the bleeding edge and then charged six times more than average for its wines. Almost astonishingly, wine lovers paid up. Encouraged by the prospects of the quality-profit combo, more wineries started appearing. Today, there are about 60. Interestingly, wine export has always been a focus for Macedonia; 85% to 95% of production is exported. That’s quite a bit of juice, considering Macedonia is the world’s 25th largest producer, making approximately half the wine as New Zealand does.



Indigenous varieties are where it’s at. The black grapes Vranec and Krastosija and the white grapes Smederevka, Zilavka and Temjanika are the highlights. Leading the pack is Vranec, whose name means “Black Stallion.” It makes seriously dark wines with mouth-watering acidity and structuring tannins that help it age well. Krastosija, kin to Zinfandel and Primitivo, is jet black with gobs of viscosity. Both grapes can easily attain 15-17% alcohol, but they have other structural elements to keep their wines in balance. Similarly, the dominant white, Smederevka, can be heady, too, though it’s often not noticed given the wine’s racy acidity. The citrusy Zilavka (Furmint in Hungary) and floral Temjanika exude charm in any of their variations, from crisply dry to lightly sweet.

IMPORTANT PRODUCERS: Bovin, Chateau Kamnik, Stobi, Popov, Tikves and Vinar



CORSICA

Corsica is surely better known as Napoleon’s birthplace and for “Europe’s Hardest Hiking Trail”, the GR 20, than for wine.

However, this staunchly proud Mediterranean island that makes but 1% of France’s production boasts 264 producers and 104 independent wineries. Quality has been on the rise for years, and with that the trend to look outside the island’s built-in market of thirsty tourists has grown. It’s not just the terrain (rugged granite, limestone and schist slopes) but also the climate that creates such fine-tuned wines. The mountain slopes are cold at night, drastically contrasting the summer sun, and the Mediterranean winds can be cooling, too, as long as they don’t shoot north from Africa.

Corsica stands by its local grapes, especially for the mid- to high-end wines; 55% of the island’s production is rosé and 30% is red. The red Nielluccio, whose DNA resembles Sangiovese, is one of the most popular. Another top black grape is Sciacarello, meaning “irresistible.” Vermentino, also known as Malvoisie de Corse, makes aromatically compelling whites. Southern French varieties like Grenache, Syrah and Carignan feature prominently, too. One particularly pleasant characteristic of Corsican wines is that the producers let the wine shine through, never the new oak.

IMPORTANT PRODUCERS: Clos Venturi, Domaine Comte Abbatucci, Domaine d’Alzipratu, Etienne Suzzoni, Domaine de Torraccia, Domaine Saporale, Yves Leccia, Domaine de Vaccelli, U Stiliccionu, Clos Nicrosi



LEBANON

Brought to the world stage by the charismatic, late Serge Hochar of Chateau Musar, Lebanese wine has developed rapidly since the end of the 15-year civil war in 1990, burgeoning from only five wineries then to over 40 today—all making very good wines.

Chateau Kefraya



Still, the generously warm Mediterranean climate sometimes seems to mask true greatness, even if the wines are delicious and distinctive. What is incredibly impressive is that this quality-focused industry has developed in such a testy sliver of the world. In fact, part of the Musar story is about harvesting grapes surrounded by shelling and gunfire.

Local grapes are more likely to star on the plate in *warak enab bil zeit* (stuffed grape leaves) than in the glass. However, a few determined wineries are making a go with two local white varieties, Obeideh and Merweh, which are usually destined for Arak production. Reds dominate production and most are blends. Typical components include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Grenache and Syrah, often blended à la Bordeaux meets Rhône. Cinsault accounts for one-third of all production and has been grown there for over 150 years. In contrast, whites tend to be varietal, and Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc lead the pack.

IMPORTANT PRODUCERS: Château Musar, Domaine St. Thomas, Château Ksara, Domaine Wardy, Château Kefraya, Domaine des Tourelles, Massaya, IXSIR, Château Ka



TURKEY

Turkey is entering a modern golden age of winemaking, despite its government’s relatively new but vicious anti-alcohol campaigns.

Since the beginning of this century, a number of small producers have diversified the landscape formerly dominated by

previously (and usually large but equally quality-driven) wineries to create a unique wine culture reinforced by oenotourism, winery hotels and fine restaurants. In the spirit of Ataturk, Turkey’s founder who decreed the re-establishment of wine production post-Ottoman Empire, these wineries persist in their work. Yet, today they are turning more and more to markets abroad given the touchy attitude toward wine at home.

Turkey hosts over 1,200 indigenous grapes; 50% are genetically unique. While only about 20 account for 95% of wine produced today, several producers are striving to change that. Narince is the luminary white. It is highly versatile, capable of producing all sorts of sparkling, still and sweet wines with finesse, depth of flavor and – in some cases – ageability. Three black grapes dominate the red category. Kalecik Karasi is a pale-ish, lighter red that masquerades between Pinot Noir, Gamay and Syrah depending on how it is made. The grape Öküzgözü translates into “big black eye of the bull” because it is unusually large for a wine-making grape. It offers baking spices, dark color and relatively supple tannins, so its wines are easy to appreciate. Finally, there is Bogazkere, named “throat scratcher” for its dense, even fierce, tannins. Concentrated in black fruit flavors and highly structured, it can age gracefully as well.

IMPORTANT PRODUCERS: Vinkara, Suvla, Urla, Kavaklıdere, Corvus, Sevilen, Likya, Pamukkale, Doluca, Yazgan, Kayra, Selendi



SUVLA WINE STORE PHOTO BY CHRISTY CANTERBURY MW





CRÉMANT DE BOURGOGNE

Made with the same varieties and on the same soils as the legendary wines of Champagne, Burgundy's sparkling wines are well-positioned today to become the next "hot" bubbly.

While the sparkling wine frenzy focuses on tank-fermented Prosecco today, the high-end game remains focused on traditional method wines. Champagne prices often keep those wines just out-of-reach for many consumers. Tuned-in consumers turn to Italy's sparklers from Franciacorta and Trentodoc, yet Burgundy's bubbles remain undiscovered. One reason is that sparkling wines have not been a focus until recently. However, in the last decade, crémant production has boomed from one to eight percent. Sometimes ringing in as low as half the cost of a bottle of non-vintage Champagne, these wines deliver serious value and can parade as Champagne look-alikes.

The wines are primarily composed of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Technically, these two grapes, along with Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris, must make up at least 30% of the cuvée. In reality, the latter two, along with Aligoté, Sacy and Gamay, tend to be added in dashes and pinches. Many of the grapes are grown on limestone and exceed the minimum nine months on lees in the bottle, creating profoundly flavorful and textured wines.

IMPORTANT PRODUCERS: Bailey Lapierre, Parigot & Richard, Louis Boillot, Caves de Lugny



SLOVENIA

Slovenia—wedged between Italy, Hungary, Austria and the Balkans—benefits from a mash-up of cultures, and is emerging as a source for racy, fresh whites and as a global leader in the "orange" wine movement.

Winemaking here dates back 2,400 years, predating France or Spain. Yet the communist government, which took power in 1948 and created Yugoslavia, turned all wineries into state-run cooperatives. Slovenia has been playing catch-up since the Iron Curtain fell in 1989.

Luckily the land is blessed. Primorska and subregions Vipava, Istra and Brda border Italy's Friuli region and feature mineral-rich soils, ridiculously steep hills, and the Adriatic's influence. Some red wine is made (from Teran and Refošk—Italy's Refosco—as well Cabernet, Merlot and Pinot Noir; Santomas and Movia make some of the finest), but this is primarily white wine territory. Even inland regions, Posavje and Podravje, are better known for whites. They work with many of the same grapes as their neighbors: Malvazija (Croatia); Sauvignon Blanc and Sivi Pinot (Pinot Grigio in Friuli) and Rebula (Ribolla Gialla); Chardonnay, Welschriesling and Sipun (Furmint in Hungary).

Two main styles have emerged. The first is fresh and zippy, and the focus of a number of newer wineries, including Pullus and Puklavec and Friends (P&F). The value is compelling, says George Milotes, MS and Beverage Director for The Capital Grille and Seasons 52: "I can pour a stunning Sauvignon Blanc that is half the price of an Italian bottle.



Slovenian Pinot Grigio is less expensive than Italy's, plus it generally has more character and flavor."

Edi Simcic and son Aleks—considered among Slovenia's best winemakers—champion a different style, aging their wines for long periods in oak which imparts an almost Burgundian profile. Other artisanal producers innovate with biodynamics, a range of different oak casks and amphorae and extended skin contact—the recipe for "orange" wines, a niche category which has captured the imagination of many wine professionals. Movia is a pioneer, with their rich, chewy, honeyed wines.

IMPORTANT PRODUCERS: Movia, Edi Simcic, Pullus, P&F, Tilia, Santomas, Batic, Kabaj



GEORGIA

Georgia is considered by many to be the cradle of wine, with over 8,000 unbroken vintages under its belt. Granted, not all of those were great. "Between the destruction of the Soviet period plus the Georgian Civil War in the 1990s, the wine industry didn't resurrect and privatize until the 21st century, so they were extremely late to the game," says Lisa Granik, MW Director of Export Strategy for Georgia.

In spite of the hardship, Georgia had one lucky break: Most Soviet countries were forced to rip out native vines in favor of international grapes, yet some speculate that because Stalin was Georgian, the nation retained its (over 500) indigenous grapes. Today this treasure trove of fascinating varieties—Rkatsiteli, Kisi, Khikhvi, Tsolikouri, Mtsvane and Saperavi—is the cornerstone of Georgia's revival.

Modernization has ushered in a range of fresher styles, yet Georgia's gift to the world of wine is the centuries-old tradition of the qvevri. Underground clay vessels where wines ferment and age, qvevris (not to be confused with amphora) are catching on in various interpretations throughout the globe by



Qvevris covered but in open air in Georgia

many famous producers. Combined with the common practice of extended skin maceration, Georgia is a world capital of “orange” wines. “I promote them as white wines for red wine drinkers,” says Granik.

Quite unintentionally, Georgian wines dovetail nicely with many of today’s wine drinking trends: They are not over-oaked (“Mostly because this is a poor country and oak is expensive, so it’s never been central to their winemaking,” shares Granik) and they are lower in alcohol—most around 11.5-12%. Granik feels the momentum: “The wines are better every year, and exports are up 61% this year. Today what I see is promise.”



IMPORTANT PRODUCERS: Chateau Mukhrani, Jakeli, LaGvinari, Orgo, Schuchmann, Shalauri, Teliani, **Vinoterra**

SARDINIA

Whereas Sicily has captured wine drinkers’ imaginations—as much as through stories of the Cosa Nostra as its physical beauty, hearty food and ever-improving wines—the wines of Sardinia, the second largest island in the Mediterranean, mostly remain off the radars of wine consumers today.

Though often occupied by foreigners, Sardegna (as it is known in Italian) has never been conquered. So perhaps it is through this determined self-reliance and self-administered introspection that Sardinia has found its highly unusual route into the modern wine world. Post-World War II, Sardinian grape yield allowances sky-rocketed and jettisoned quality into an abyss. Today, as the rest of the wine world becomes more quality-oriented, yields there stay almost bizarrely high. That is easy to achieve considering many vineyards are in flatter areas. However,



Sardinia is the second largest island in the Mediterranean

the best wines tend to come from the hills from far lower yields, and many producers have abandoned the DOCs to make IGT wines of gloriously distinctive Mediterranean character.

Sitting only 125 miles west of Italy, Sardinia’s wealth of vines surprisingly is composed primarily of Spanish grape varieties, with a heavy Catalan accent. The most important reds are Cannonau (Garnacha), Carignano (Carignan), Monica and Bovale (Graciano). Vermentino is the star white grape followed by several types of Malvasia.



IMPORTANT PRODUCERS: Argiolas, Capichera, Santadi, **Sella & Mosca**, Punica



NATURAL WINE

“Natural Wine” is the hipster these days, meaning its wines as popular as they are controversial.

Ardent fans of the category often prefer to drink nothing else. However, there are issues with the name. “Natural” can be defined strikingly differently—in a way that definitely matters to well-versed fans of the category—by the many possible steps a producer may take to do as little as feasible to a wine. And the potential for confusion is great, starting with the fact the label itself may not even declare itself simply as “natural wine.” Moreover, once the pluses

and caveats are understood, one often never quite knows what’s going to come out of the bottle. For some, that’s awesome. For others, that’s annoying.

Natural wines can be made from any grape. It’s the style that counts. First and foremost, winemakers work with the principle to add little to no chemicals or additives. For example, many are made with little or no added sulphur, which can result in highly variable juice from one bottle to the next as sulphur acts to protect the wine and keep it in the same phase from the winery to the consumer. Also important to the natural winemaking philosophy is not to employ overly intrusive technological means during production. An extreme example going in the opposite direction are skin-macerated whites called “orange wines” (typically amber in color).

IMPORTANT PRODUCERS: Nicolas and Virginie Joly (Coulée de Serrant), Gravner (Friuli), Lalou Bize Leroy (Burgundy), Marcel Lapierre (Beaujolais), Nikolaihof (Austria), Coturri (California), Cédric Bouchard (Champagne), Catherine and Pierre Breton (Central Loire), Movia (Slovenia), Lagvinari Krakhuna (Georgia), Paolo Bea (Umbria), C.O.S. (Sicily), **Reyneke** (South Africa), Cowhorn (Oregon), Thierry Puzelat (Central Loire)

