

## Promise of the East

Eastern European wine is having a pretty tough time of it at the moment. It's far cry from the early 1980s when Bulgarian "Cab" rolled over the UK wine market with the impact of a communist tank, and we were all proud to show off our bargain spotting ability. In fact the Bulgarians have a strong claim to inventing the market for varietal wines, not the Aussies at all. Hungary, Romania and even Moldova have all had their few moments in the limelight as the next big thing, but so far none have really held on in the face of competition from the New World.

Most of the major buyers who control the range of wines we see on shop shelves in the UK seem inclined to lump Eastern Europe into one category, complete with its rather grey, grim iron curtain imagery. The New World, in comparison, is full of images of holidays, sunshine and fun, none of which does the wine marketing any harm. As far as the UK wine drinker is concerned, Eastern Europe is largely confined to Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, with a few hangers on from the former Yugoslavia (remember Lutomer Laski Rizling, once one of our most popular tipples?) and that's where I'm going to stay for this report.

## Battle of the Balkans

Most people believe that the job of a wine buyer is glamorous – jetting off round the world and wine tasting too. A buying trip or two in Bulgaria would soon destroy that notion – though things have definitely improved since my first visit back in 1990. Then the communist barriers had only just come down and the country was in disarray. It was question of luck (and which side of the hotel you were in) if you got warm water at all, and even then it was a murky brown. Food was monotonous, with yoghurt and cucumber then anonymous brown meat at every meal, frequently accompanied by Bulgarians alternating mouthfuls with puffs on their tarry black cigarettes. The wine had to have personality to cope!

Wines from Bulgaria (then known as Thrace) were mentioned in the Iliad and Odyssey and have hung on in spite of setbacks like centuries of Muslim rule and Phylloxera. The industry that we might recognise is quite recent, and international varieties like Chardonnay, Cabernet and Merlot were only widely planted in the 1960s, taking over from local grapes like Gamza, Mavrud and Melnik. It was these international names that provided the fuel for all those wonderfully soft, ripe and mature reds that impressed so much during the export boom of the 1980s.

Gorbachov's reforms in the mid 1980s led to vineyards abandoned on massive scale, as the massive Soviet market tried to come to terms with drinking less alcohol. Poor handling of land reform was also a problem for the wine industry. Most wineries rely on independent growers for their fruit, but it's a tough job to negotiate decent fruit quality when you are not sure who owns the land (and tracing the owners pre 1947 has not always been easy when records are sketchy). It has been difficult for many new landowners too – what do you do with a plot of vines if your family has lived in a city for over 2 generations?

## The Blueridge Mountains of Bulgaria

More than a decade on, things have changed substantially with some serious outside investments, most notably over 60 million US dollars on Domaine Boyar and its Blueridge winery. 15 million US dollars alone went on a state of the art winery, claimed to be one of the most modern in Europe, and built by the same Australian company who built Rosemount's winery. Being able to control wine making at the flick of a computer key board is great ... as far as it goes, but the raw material has to be right to have any chance of competing with the New

World. It's recognising this that has driven the merger between Domaine Boyar and the winery at Rousse with its 1000 hectares of land to form Blueridge Estates. More Australian influence comes in the shape of Di Davidson, former senior grape grower for Penfolds, to help plant the new vineyards with exactly the right grape varieties. In general though, Bulgarian vineyards are in a disastrous state, with around one third of the vineyards over 20 years old and in need of replanting and as much as 17% unproductive due to disease and infestation.

Perhaps surprisingly in the face of all this new world influence, the winemaker at Blueridge is Bulgarian, but aims to produce wines of a style not seen from Bulgaria before. The Domaine Boyar Black Rosé (Tesco/ £3.99) is certainly a strikingly different wine – 100% Cabernet Sauvignon and made in a full-bodied but vividly fruity style, it is seriously delicious rosé. Others worth a try are the soft, plummy and distinctly Rioja-ish Blueridge Merlot American Barrels (£3.99 Waitrose) and for a taste of the native, Waitrose have listed a pair of dual varietals at £2.99. The Chardonnay/Dimiat is aromatic, peachy and soft, while its red brother, a Merlot/ Gamza blend is a chunky, tasty, slightly rustic and spicy wine.

### Flying High in Hungary

Wine has been part of Hungarian life at least since Roman times and when the country was rebuilt after the Mongol invasion of 1241, immigrants who were wine experts were actively encouraged. Hungary's most famous wine, the almost legendary Tokaji, was first mentioned in records in the fifteenth century, though it was almost certainly dry then. Now it is undoubtedly one of the world's great sweet wines and the cellars where it is made have been declared a Unesco world heritage site. However, Tokaji is a whole story in its own right and not for this article, but what it does do is give Hungary serious "cred" for her wine making.

Hungary has long been the most westernised of the Eastern Bloc nations (never any problems with hot water here - at least in Budapest). Hungary also has more of a wine and food culture than her neighbours seem to have – at least most of us have heard of goulash, but how many world famous Bulgarian or Romanian dishes are there? This means it has been a smoother process for Hungary to adapt to western demands. Nonetheless it was only a decade ago that buying trips included tours of empty, echoing wineries, complete with disused private railway platforms for exporting wine to the seemingly unquenchable (and unfussy) Soviet market. In good capitalist fashion, it was the collapse of this market that forced a change of outlook towards the west.

Flying winemakers were a key part of the Hungarian wine revolution, in helping wineries clean up their act and understand the need for techniques like hygiene, temperature control and consistency. Kym Milne, an Aussie who relished a challenge, was one of the first to get involved and privately admitted that the Hungarians used to come somewhere near the top of the list for stubbornness, with their communist attitudes (and he has worked in a lot of countries). Foreign investment to buy the right kit seems to have been easier in Hungary as the economic and political situation is more stable than the rest of the region. Overall, the wines have come on enormously in the last ten years and are probably better now than ever.

### Root and Branch

Inevitably the next step is back to the vineyards and New Zealand "Vine Doctor", Dick Smart has been working with Chapel Hill and Nagyrede for 4 years now to improve pruning, trellising and managing the leaf cover. Clive Hartnell, a Kiwi who now makes the wine under Kym's direction points out that Hungary's problems are similar to New Zealand, though on a bigger scale. Both countries

have deep fertile soils and very vigorous leafy vines - requiring intensive work in the vineyards. He points out that New Zealand had no quality image until the vineyards were sorted out and yet now New Zealand has the highest average selling price per bottle of any nation. And like New Zealand, Hungary has a reputation for whites above all (with around 70% of the vineyards planted with white varieties). Sadly for too long Hungary has been dragged down along with the Eastern European category, seen as a producer of cheap whites to partner Bulgaria's reds. Never mind that Hungary can produce better quality "everyday" Chardonnay than Australia, no-one will drink it unless it's cheap and heavily promoted.

#### A Taste of Freedom

Hilltop winery, with its Riverview brand is determined to get away from drab Eastern Bloc imagery with its eye-catching geometric labels. Inside the bottle the wines are some great value, flavoursome and ultra-clean. Look for the appealingly fragrant "peaches and cream" Chardonnay/Pinot Grigio (£3.99 Asda, Budgens, Co-op, Morrisons, Safeway, Sainsbury, Tesco); the spicy, rose-scented Gewurztraminer (£3.99 Sainsbury/Safeway) and the cheerfully fruity Kekfrankos/Merlot (£3.99 Asda, Budgens, Co-op, Morrisons, Safeway, Sainsbury, Tesco), a blend of an indigenous variety with the plummy softness of Merlot.

From Nagyrede, awarded "Hungarian Winery of the Year 2002" and where wine making is over seen by Kym Milne, look for the crunchy apple freshness, with a twist of spice in Nagyrede Pinot Grigio (£3.79 Sainsbury, Safeway under Matra Mountain label). Also from this winery, Spice Trail white (£3.99 Safeway, Somerfield, Alldays) is a blend of Pinot Grigio with the local Irsai Oliver specially blended to go with oriental foods. Another one of Kym's projects is the Chapel Hill wines from the shores of Lake Balaton (the largest lake in Europe). Chapel Hill Oaked Chardonnay (£3.99 Sainsbury, Waitrose) is consistently good value and much better than anything from California at this price, while the Chapel Hill Irsai Oliver is a delicately floral, light summery wine.

#### Romania – Promising Pinot and Other Stories

Romania is Eastern Europe's biggest wine producer with around 250,000 hectares of vineyards (similar to Argentina) and hovers around tenth place in global wine production. She is on the same latitude as France, though the climate is more continental and therefore more extreme (ranging from -20 to +30°C). Archaeological evidence suggests grape growing here dates back 6000 years.

Unlike Bulgaria and Hungary, who have always exported a majority of their production, Romanians have had a huge thirst for their own product and therefore very much inward looking. Romania's economic troubles are far from over, even 13 years on from the end of the dictatorial Ceausescu regime and promoting wine has not exactly been a priority for a government scrabbling for cash. Now, light is dawning that wine could be a good way of generating that much needed foreign currency, but the investments needed to generate the essential quality and consistency have had to come from overseas.

#### The Liverpudlian Connection

Halewood International, based in Liverpool, are behind the Prahova Valley range and were the first company to export Romanian wines. They now control about 70% of wine exports and in 1999 they showed their long-term commitment by buying 7 wineries in the Dealul Mare region. These have had to be gutted and re-equipped – they even had to get the Romanian army in to blow up ancient concrete vats safely without the buildings collapsing. Buying wineries is a serious financial commitment, but Halewood felt it was the only way forward in the effort to control quality. Their winemaker is young Romanian, with experience from all

over the world, but his ability to communicate with the local growers is vital. As with the rest of the Eastern Bloc, fruit quality is the next big step. Getting the grapes picked at the right time is key, but most growers want to pick early (before the weather breaks) to guarantee some crop and therefore income. Light-fingered Gypsies are apparently a major pest too – if the grapes are left to ripen too long. It is very frustrating to see your own grapes for sale by the roadside. Land reform is still proceeding and vineyards are slowly returning to private hands, though plots tend to be postage stamps. This makes building up a sizeable holding virtually impossible as a buyer may have to negotiate with hundreds of people. There's more mileage in unplanted land - it's easier to start from scratch.

The German Company Reh Kendermann, behind the River Route range, has also invested heavily in Romania, where they have bought and refurbished a winery, plus 250 hectares of mainly decommissioned vineyard land. 57 hectares have been replanted so far, with modern clones, though this is expensive and takes time. Local growers rarely have the money for any land improvements and Reh Kendermann has even paid in advance with supplies like wire to help out.

Both producers see Romania as having the potential to produce some of the most exciting wines in Eastern Europe, especially reds, because of vineyard locations. At present, the wines that are selling are mostly red and international grapes (such as River Route Merlot – actually the most planted red), but Romania's real point of difference is Pinot Noir. Widely known as a fickle and tricky grape, Pinot Noir is never cheap, yet the Romanians can turn out decently drinkable stuff for around £3.50 (Prahova Valley £3.49 Co-op/ Tesco). Spend just an extra 50p and try the Prahova Valley Reserve Pinot Noir in Sainsbury (£3.99) - a silky, stylish and fantastic value red wine. The potential for native grape varieties seems limited until the drinking public become braver – after all who wants to embarrass themselves asking for Feteasca Neagra, however flavoursome the wine is (it should sell for just £4.49 but is not stocked anywhere yet).

### Best of the Rest

As Angus Clarke at the Co-op points out, it's difficult to justify widening the range in a category that is shrinking, so he and most of the supermarkets and retail chains are sticking to the big 3. One notable exception is a wonderfully intense juicy Merlot from Macedonia, being sold by Waitrose as Linden Tree Merlot and about to go into Oddbins as Rift Point Merlot. This is a serious bargain at around £3.69 – serve it to your friends without telling them where it's from and they'll probably take it for a young but decent Bordeaux. You will have to look hard on map to find this tiny country, bordering Greece, and the birthplace of Alexander the Great. There are around 30,000 hectares of vineyards, healthy and planted with lots of Merlot and Cab and with a warm, sunny climate to ripen them to the full. Macedonia will never be a big player, but definitely one to watch.

### Out and About

Eastern Europe still has a serious amount of work to do to overcome the prejudice of most wine drinkers, so the New World won't have to look to its laurels just yet. It's spent too long stuck with the tag of bargain basement wines and too often failed to deliver in the bottle. Eastern European wine companies have not seen the value of emulating Australia's successful approach to marketing, i.e. "Wine Australia", by working collectively to tackle their image problem and in reality the industry is mostly too fragmented for this to be anything more than a pipe dream.

As Angus Clark, buyer for the Co-op puts it neatly "There are some great wines coming out of Eastern Europe. The enormous challenge is how to present them in

the best possible light. They are, for the most part, very price competitive. Each of the countries has some excellent microclimates for growing fruit. There is a diverse mixture of both interesting indigenous and international varieties available. There are some very committed people working towards improving viticulture, winemaking and sales within the sector."

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