

VIEWPOINT

BRIGHT PROSPECTS AHEAD

Jancis Robinson OBE, Master of Wine, presents her tasting notes on the best Bulgarian wines.

With its reliably warm summers and considerable plantings of international grape varieties, there is no reason that Bulgaria should not be an important source of good-value, exportable wine.

Generally speaking, Bulgarian red wines are better than whites. Bulgarians have at last got the hang of making fresh white wines, but most grapes seem to be picked too early in the ripening process to have developed much fruit flavour.

Wine producers are also embroiled in a long and regrettable love affair with oak, frequently over-oaking both reds and whites (*vive le raisin*, I'd say). While progressing from dire over-use of oak chips, they now show every sign of having spent too much on barrels and too little on maximising grape quality. Having said that, Bulgarian oak could be pretty interesting, almost like a spicy version of Limousin, if it were seasoned properly.

GRAPE VARIETIES: Cabernet Sauvignon has a great future and a great past – just not a particularly exciting present. It is the brightest hope for exports and seems a bit more exciting than the Merlot.

Mavrud is the most famous Bulgarian indigenous red wine grape, for long a speciality of the Assenovgrad region. In this era when everyone is searching for “heritage grapes”, well-made Mavrud could be Bulgaria's distinguishing mark, backed up by some Melnik and Rubin.

Melnik, the small-berried variety, is the toothsome speciality of the far south-west of the country and the Damianitza winery.

Gamza, a northern Bulgarian speciality, is a fruity red grape thought to be identical with Hungary's Kadarka. There is much discussion about which predated the other.

Among whites, Chardonnay is queen,



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Sauvignon Blanc princess, but the local specialities include Red Misket – a deep pink-skinned grape whose white flesh can make fragrant, light white wines in the Sun-gulare valley especially – Muscat Ottonel, Traminer and the widely planted Dimiat which is rarely exported.

TASTING NOTES

REDS: Bin 40 Cabernet Sauvignon 2002 Santa Sarah. Extremely opulent and seductive with neat, dry tannins on the finish. Flattering and only gently oaked, this should bring tears of pride to the eyes of any expatriate Bulgarian (provided he or she is not a rival wine producer). The name is not Australian-inspired but refers to “Ich bin 40”: the German-based winemaker turned 40 in 2002.

All the Todoroff reds, especially Boutique Mavrud 2002, Teres Merlot 2001 and the not-yet-released reserve blend of 2001 Cabernet, Merlot and Mavrud. These are truly a big step up for Bulgarian wine, made with great care from closely supervised vineyards.

Mavrud 1974 Assenovgrad. This antique

proved that Bulgarian wines really can age. It is a little volatile and only 12.2% alcohol but still haunting and very much together with lovely gentle sweetness.

ReDark Merlot 2001 Damianitza. A Marc Dworkin of Bordeaux production, it has an intense nose, riper fruit than most and a slightly hot finish but it is seriously attention grabbing.

Private Cabernet Sauvignon 2001 Santa Sarah. I managed to see a sort of Léo-ville Barton style in this wine, more rigid than its successor, Bin 40. It was extremely fine and still youthful.

Uniqato Melnik 2001 Damianitza. Real vibrancy and personality. Complete, slightly dusty (slightly Greek?). Quite tough tannins on the finish but there's a real beginning, middle and end to this very interesting wine. Oak still in evidence.

WHITES: Aligote 2002 Liaskovets. A strange choice perhaps from a very traditional winery in northern white wine country, but this whistle-clean wine was so true to the variety, and much fresher and more appetising than many a Côte d'Or Aligoté at three times the price.

Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc 2002 Preslav. Lots of fruit for a change. Slavyantsi's 2002 Slavyantsi “Chardonnay” tasted rather similar.

Sauvignon Blanc 2002 Black Sea Gold. This coastal winery clearly has a way with white wine making. Its Chardonnay 2002 won the white wine prize, though I found it just a bit too swamped by oak. 🍷

N.B. *The best wines I tasted are listed here in approximately descending order of my personal preference rather than the official order of the results of the joint judging in Sofia which I chaired.*

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