

## Lebanon cultivates niche wine segment

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Published: April 26 2010 17:06 | Last updated: April 26 2010 17:06

Domaine des Tourelles and Coteaux de Botrys are two very different vineyards, lying on opposite sides of Lebanon.

The former, in the eastern Bekaa Valley, is one of the country's oldest wineries. Production was erratic during and after the 1975-1990 civil war when the vineyard was best known for its **arak**, an aniseed drink.

Now the Issa family, the new majority owners and managers of Domaine des Tourelles, plan to raise production from 80,000 to 100,000 bottles per year.



Young vines at the Domaine de Tourelles winery

In contrast, Coteaux de Botrys was started near the coastal town of Batroun in 1998 by Joseph Bitar, a retired general. Since his death, Mr Bitar's daughters see it as their mission to carry on his work and to increase production from 40,000 to 65,000 bottles a year over five years.

Nayla Bitar muses on the explosion of small wineries in Lebanon. There are now eight near Batroun alone. "In 1998 people questioned my father's wisdom of putting money in vines. Now they're all doing it," she says.

In the past 15 years, the number of Lebanese wine producers has exploded from five in 1995 to 33 this year – and counting.

Lebanon is a small country, covering just 2 per cent of France's surface area. It has been wracked by violence for years and as a result wine production has always been small. Most vineyards aim at production in the tens of thousands of bottles rather than the millions of the big international producers.

With a total production of just 6m-7m bottles a year, of which about half is exported, Lebanese growers can only go the boutique way, says Michael Karam, an expert on Lebanese wine whose guide detailing all 33 vineyards is due to be published later this year.

Even Ksara and Kefraya, the largest, most established vineyards, produce only 2m bottles each, small by international standards.

"Lebanon is selling itself as a boutique destination in tourism and it is only logical that its wine industry, which is so bound up with tourism, also promotes itself as a boutique product," Mr Karam says.

Sami Ghosn, who with his brother Ramzi started the trend for boutique vineyards in Lebanon with the Masaya vineyard in the Bekaa in 1998, says that operators have to be realistic from the outset. "When you start a boutique winery everything follows from that decision – the vines, the cave [cellars], the press."

Mr Ghosn says that Masaya can produce 300,000 bottles a year but for quality reasons its usual limit is about 200,000.

The absence of economies of scale means that Lebanese wines, even from the larger producers, are relatively dear. One of the cheapest wines of one of the larger producers may sell in the UK for \$14.

As a result, the Lebanese need to market their wines and educate the world that, as Mr Karam says: "Lebanon is not only a war country, it is a wine country."

He is also convinced that: "Lebanese wine can be marketed as the sexiest wine in the world."

Until now Serge Hochar, who heads Chateau Musar and who chairs UVL, the union of wine growers, has been one of the main promoters of the image of Lebanese wine abroad, especially in the UK where it is relatively well-known.

Mr Hochar kept his vineyard going **throughout the civil war** by shifting towards exports early on. It now produces about 500,000 bottles a year.

"Seeing all those new producers is my greatest satisfaction," says Mr Hochar, who awkwardly displays a lifetime achievement award he has just received from a German magazine.

While he welcomes the new, often smaller, producers, he warns that quality needs to be maintained.

The large growers feel that they have established Lebanese wines as a quality brand abroad and worry that less

professional newcomers may tarnish that image.

However, a UVL proposal to set up a government-sanctioned wine institute to control quality has been stuck in red tape for years.

The smaller wine makers, on the other hand, insist that they are the real quality producers, alleging that some of the larger and older wineries use grapes from different areas of the country rather than from well-managed vineyards. Some of them favour the introduction of what is known in France as the AOC, appellation d'origine contrôlée, which certifies the origins of grapes.

Even so, some of the new producers acknowledge the trailblazing role that Mr Hochar has played.

"He certainly did a great job making Lebanese wines known," says Sandro Saadé, who together with his brother Karim recently started new vineyards in Syria and Lebanon, Bargylus and Marsyas, respectively.

The Saadés are typical of some of the new breed of Lebanese wine makers who include rich expatriate investors such as Carlos Ghosn, chief executive of Renault and Nissan.

The Saadés are ambitious and aim to produce 250,000 bottles within a few years, but wine is not their primary business. The family also has interests in tourism and real estate, so even though they talk about it being a passion, wine is part of a larger portfolio.

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