

Bulgaria

The East Coast of the Balkans

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Photo courtesy of Villa Melnik

Folk troupe
at Villa
Melnik in the
Struma River
Valley.

Despite a “brief” 500-year interruption by the Muslim Turks, whose invasion and occupation lasted from 1393 to 1878, Bulgaria has several millennia of wine production under its belt. In the United States, however, Bulgarian wines—along with those of other Balkan nations—are just emerging on the market. And unlike the cheap and cheerful exports of the 1980s, which consisted primarily of international varieties and gained little traction, the *nouvelle vague* now reaching our shores will showcase local grapes at higher, well-merited price tags.



KEY GRAPE VARIETIES

- **Mavrud:** This ancient, traditional red grape is undoubtedly one of Bulgaria's stars. Grown primarily in the western Thracian Lowlands around Assenovgrad, south of Plovdiv, it produces scarlet wines filled with blackberry and blueberry fruit. Higher-end examples tend to be oak aged, gaining longevity from their firm tannins and fine acidity.
- **Rubin:** Created in the 1940s, this cross of Nebbiolo and Syrah is grown mostly in southern and eastern Bulgaria. It produces inky, ageworthy wines that are high in extract and rich in fruit; flavors run dark, from blackcurrant to sloe and loganberry, with hints of violets.
- **Melnik 55 (aka Ranna Melnishka Loza or Early Melnik):** Grown exclusively in the southwest, where it accounts for 57% of area plantings, this red hybrid was born in the 1960s out of an effort to create earlier-ripening varieties. Deeply aromatic and intensely colored, it, too, is ageworthy, thanks largely to its tiny, thick-skinned berries.
- **Red Misket (aka Misket Cherven):** This variety has been grown all over Bulgaria for centuries, producing perfumed, quality-oriented white wines as well as table grapes. The name alludes to its pink skin, not a relationship to the Muscat family.
- **Pamid:** This was once Bulgaria's most common red grape; in fact, it was popular across the Balkans. Interest waned after the introduction of international varieties, however, and today it is used primarily to make wines for immediate drinking.
- **Dimiat:** The highly aromatic Dimiat is used in white table wines as well as high-end brands. Though cultivated across the Balkans, it is grown primarily around the Black Sea.



Barrels and bottles at Angelus Estate in the Rose Valley.

Christy Canterbury, MW, is a Manhattan-based wine journalist, public speaker, and judge. She writes for *Decanter*, *Wine Enthusiast*, *Food Arts*, *Beverage Media*, and several blogs and is the consulting editor of *Rock and Vine*. Recent public-speaking engagements included appearances at VinExpo, the European Wine Bloggers' Digital Wine Communications Conference, and the Hong Kong International Wine & Spirits Fair. Previously, she was the global beverage director for *Culinary Concepts* by Jean-Georges Vongerichten and the national wine director for the Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group.

Granted, Bulgarian production has been fraught with challenges for the past 60 years or so, mostly owing to the Communist government's launch of Vinprom at the end of World War II. This giant cooperative controlled not only production but domestic and international commerce. After the resignation of Todor Zhivkov, the head of state from 1954 to 1989, Bulgarians largely pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps, with very little help from foreign investors. But when the European Union accepted the country's entry in 2007, much-needed funds for new—indeed, impressively state-of-the-art—wineries and vineyards began to flow in.

Ironically, it was Vinprom that instigated the implantation of French varieties in the 1960s. Both times I have visited Bulgaria, the sheer quantity of international-grape production has astounded me. With few exceptions, wines from these varieties have been the most impressive, but I hope and expect that indigenous varieties (see box) will make a solid comeback.

Although red grapes represent more than half of Bulgaria's vineyard plantings, white- and sparkling-wine production has grown in response to export demand. Today, the country exports 40% of its wine to markets led by Russia, Romania, Poland, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Belgium, and Germany.

Wine Regions

Bulgaria sits on the eastern edge of the Balkan Peninsula, where it meets the Black Sea. Its Wine Law of 1978 was widely regarded as the most progressive in the Communist bloc, but in recent years the country has needed to bring its appellation laws in line with EU requirements.

Photos by Dusan Jelic



Castra Rubra owner Jair Agopian with Wines of Balkans social-media director Dusan Jelic.

There are now two regional designations, or Protected Geographical Indications, splitting the country roughly in half with the Balkan Mountains (Stara Planina) as a dividing line; the northern part is called the Danubian Plain, while the south is referred to as the Thracian Lowlands. The north has a more continental climate; the south—protected by the mountains from cold, northerly winds—is more Mediterranean. But there are also 51 official subzones, or Protected Designations of Origin. Overall, Bulgarian wine-makers generally refer to seven major wine areas, listed here from approximately north to south.

Danubian Plain: This area of north-central Bulgaria stretches from the Romanian border (the Danube River) to the foothills of the Balkan Mountains. The climate is so extreme that winter frosts can kill vines, and the summers are hot and arid. Annual rainfall averages 24 inches.

Northwest Bulgaria: This rather mountainous corner of the country, bordering the Danubian Plain, also stretches to the Balkan Mountains. Wine-grape production was more developed in the Communist era but has waned in recent years; new estates such as Chateau Burgozone and Borovitza Winery are bound to turn this situation around.

Black Sea: The Black Sea region, which is further subdivided into 32 farming districts, encompasses the entire eastern border of the country. Some of the nation's largest and oldest wineries—including the commercial Black Sea Gold and LVK-Vinprom Targovishte—are based here, working with about 30% of Bulgaria's vineyard land. Because of the maritime influence, the climate is milder than it is farther west.

Rose Valley: The central Rose Valley is also known, less picturesquely, as the sub-Balkan region. Famed vineyards, such as those owned today by Rose Valley Winery, are located here,



Castra Rubra cellar (top) and tasting room (above) in Sakar.

where the Balkan Mountains offer protection from northerly weather patterns while providing excellent slopeside ventilation. Although the valley is the birthplace of Red Misket, many other grapes thrive as well.

Sakar: This region on the country's south-central border with Greece, named for the local mountain range, is home to such recent start-ups as Castra Rubra and Katarzyna Estate. With the Aegean Sea only 43 miles away, a mild climate and aerating breezes make for excellent growing conditions.

Thracian Lowlands: South of the Rose Valley in central Bulgaria, this is the country's largest wine region. The eastern portion, between the Rose Valley and Sakar, is a fertile area well known for farming. Rustic and *über*-modern winemaking coexist here, with whites and bubbies mak-





Chateau Burgozone owners Svetla Marinova and Stefan Marinov.



Chateau Burgozone winery (top) and vineyards (above) in Northwest Bulgaria.



ing headway. Although Western Thrace, home of the red Mavrud, once focused almost exclusively on single-varietal wines, its blends are shining brighter with each vintage.

Struma River Valley: Tucked into the southwest corner of Bulgaria, the Struma River Valley is its warmest wine region, with a strong Mediterranean influence. From the town of Melnik comes the region's signature grape, in numerous variants including Melnik 55, Melnik 82, and Melnik Ruen.

Notable Producers

The following wineries show special potential, but my list is by no means comprehensive; many others make tasty wines worthy of enjoyment and contemplation.

Angelus Estate

Bania
Nova Zagora
+359-2-421-4065
angelusestate.com
Importer: Masciarelli Wine Company
www.masciarelliwine.com

This winery, completed just in time for the 2012 harvest, would make even a Bordeaux chateau owner envious. Located near Nova Zagora in the Rose Valley, with 262 acres planted exclusively to international varieties, it gained an elite reputation as soon as its first wines hit the market in 2009.

Castra Rubra

Lozenetz St., 22
1421 Sofia
+359-2-963-1763
castrarubra.com
Importer: McM Imports
www.mcmimports.com

Established in Sakar in 2004, this brand is the younger sibling of the Telish winery on the Danubian Plain. Its bottlings are stylish and delicious, thanks in part to consultant Michel Roland. Entry-level labels include Dominant, Nimbus, and Via Diagonalis; Butterfly's Rock and Castra Rubra are the premium wines.

Chateau Burgozone

Oryahovskoshosestr. No. 1
3341 Leskovets, Oryahovo
+359-973-58844
www.burgozone.bg
Importer: House of Burgundy
www.thehouseofburgundy.com

Chateau Burgozone tends nearly 250 acres of newly planted vines along the Danube River, 425-590 feet above sea level. Within the vineyard lie the ruins of the Roman fortress for which the estate is named. Every time I see the label, I think of “Bourgogne,” and though the resemblance is coincidental, these wines are indeed elegant in style.

Dragomir Winery Estate

15 Kuklensko Shose Blvd.
Plovdiv
+359-88-832-5830
www.dragomir.bg
Not yet imported

Two Bulgarian enologists—Natalia Gadzheva and Konstantin Stoev—and wine lover Valeri Mektupchian established this Rose Valley property in 2006 with a vision of producing unconventional bottlings. Though they do not own vineyards, they carefully supervise the contract farming for their five different lines.

Edoardo Miroglio Wine Cellar

Elenovo
Nova Zagora 8943
+359-445-00411
emiroglio-wine.com
Importer: Texavino
www.texavino.com



Photos by Dusan Jelic



This exceptionally modern estate in eastern Thrace is one of Bulgaria’s largest recent projects. According to the *DiVino Guide: Bulgarian Wines 2013*, investment by the namesake Italian textile magnate has surpassed 22 million euros since its founding in 2002. The first vintage was 2005; although the wines are all good, the sparklers are exceptional.

Katarzyna Estate

23 Septemvri St.
6500 Svilengrad, Haskovo
+359-249-11732
katarzyna.bg
Not yet imported

This is another huge recent undertaking, with more than 1,360 acres under vine in Sakar near the border with Greece. Reflecting the inspiration of its Polish owner, Krzysztof Trylinski, who lives in France, most of Katarzyna’s wines bear French names. The vineyards and winery have not been the only investments here; thanks to aggressive marketing, 80% of the production is sold within Bulgaria.

Maryan Winery

Maryan, Veliko Tarnovo
+359-888-135880
Not yet imported

This property on the Danubian Plain, near Veliko Tarnovo, was founded in 2010 by the Ivanov family, who released their first vintage in 2011. It was described to me by Iassen Zahariev, a journalist with Bulgarian wine forum Divino. Taste, as Bulgaria’s newest star—and I can’t disagree after sampling its whites and rosés.



Edoardo Miroglio estate in the Rose Valley (top); winemaker Marco Monchiero (left).



Katarzyna Estate tank room in the Thracian Lowlands.

Minkov Brothers

8473 Venec, Karnobat
 +359-882-151500
 Not yet imported

Though its label reads “Tradition since 1875,” this is not actually one of the nation’s



Orbelus vineyards in the Struma River Valley.

oldest wineries, having been launched only in 2006 following a state-of-the-art restoration of its predecessor. It is among the larger projects, however, with 1,137 planted acres in the northern Black Sea region.

Orbelus

Bioagrofoods 2000 Ltd.
 39 Layosh Koshut St.
 1606 Sofia
 +359-295-15495
www.orbelus-bg.com
 Not yet imported

Five attorneys established this facility in the Struma River Valley in 2000. Their wines are made strictly with organic grapes, sourced from 20 different vineyards on a total of 50 acres. The results are excellent, particularly the reds, most of which are based on Melnik 55.



Villa Melnik estate in the Struma River Valley.

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Castra Rubra Via Diagonalis White 2011 \$15

The Chardonnay and Grenache Blanc in this medium-bodied blend provide enough viscosity and plumpness to ensure that it sips well alone, yet the bright acidity contributed by Sauvignons Blanc and Gris make it highly compatible with food. Sémillon and Petit Manseng add even more complexity to a wide array of fruit aromas, ranging from pomelo and tangerine to pluot and yellow pear.

Chateau Burgozone Pinot Noir 2011 \$18

Fresh and vibrantly varietal, this medium-bodied Pinot Noir is rich in notes of strawberry, lingonberry, and dried cranberry. A light chill would highlight its harmonious tannins and buoyant acidity—which isn't to suggest that it's lacking in complexity, since the finish holds on for a good while.

Edoardo Miroglio Brut N.V. \$25

Until I discovered this wine last year, I had thought only one producer outside France (Roederer Estate) was making traditional-method sparklers to rival those of Champagne. Here, the *perlage* is gentle, tiny, and continuously streaming; the nose is biscuity and appley, with undercurrents of red plum; and the body is fairly light yet bustling with acidity.



Villa Melnik owners Lyubka Zikatanova, left, and Nikola Zikatanov, right, with enologist Rumyana Stoilova, second from left, and guests (top); winery (middle); and traditional blessing for the pruning season (above).

1111 Sofia
+359-888-923703
www.villamelnik.com
Not yet imported

This family-run estate in the Struma River Valley, launched in 2004, comprises 74 acres planted to local and international varieties. The proprietors, Nikola Zikatanov and Lyubka Zikatanova, made everything offsite at first, but now have their own winery. 🍷

Salla Estate

47 Bratiq Miladinovi St., Floor 6
9002 Varna
+359-52-611420
www.salla.bg
Not yet imported

Situated in the Black Sea region between the coastal city of Varna and Shumen to the west, this new producer, founded in 2010, makes exciting wines from international varieties grown in estate vineyards. The labels incorporate the name of Salla's home village, Blaskovo.

Santa Sarah

Hrishtenko Shose St., Golesh Base
6000 Stara Zagora
+359-42-649669
www.santa-sarah.com
Not yet imported

The term *garagiste* has often been applied to this producer, which has been purchasing grapes from multiple sites in the Thracian Lowlands since 1999. *Traileriste* would be more appropriate, since the wines are actually being made in campers! A facility near Goritsa (to the north near Shumen), where Santa Sarah is also farming nearly 100 acres, is in the planning stages.

Villa Melnik Winery Ltd.

67B Postoianstvo St.
Business Center Zlatan Lev