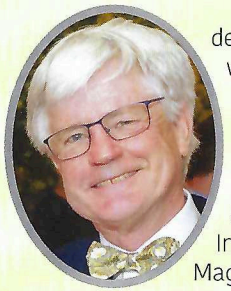
EXPLORING WINE...
WITH PROFESSOR TIM UNWIN

WINES FROM CONFLICT ZONES

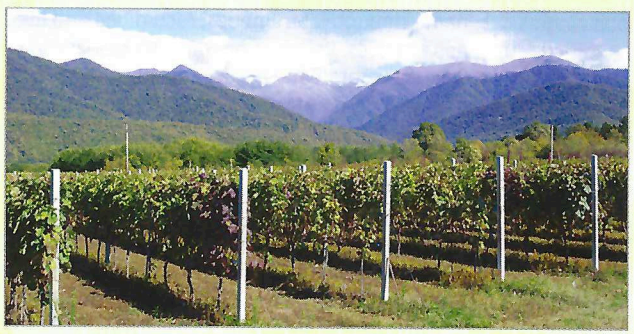


I remember reading stories in the 1970s and 1980s about the difficulties faced by Lebanese wine-growers in the Bekaa Valley, when artillery shells bombarded the vineyards and roads were often barricaded. Talking with Ronald Hochar (Chateau Musar) more recently brought home the amazing courage of wine-growers in Lebanon in those times. Nevertheless, recent attacks on Lebanon by Israeli forces since 2024 continue to devastate the land, killing people and making wine production enormously difficult. In 2024, for example, Chateau Rayak's winery was badly damaged by blasts from Israeli bombs directed at a Hezbollah weapons store nearby, leading to the loss of 60 tonnes of grapes. Electricity and water outages mean that wine often has to be made by the light from headlamps, and Israeli drones monitoring the roads often make travel unsafe.

Russia's expansionist agendas have likewise had a devastating impact on wine production in Ukraine. This was vividly brought home to me in conversations with Ukrainian wine producers earlier this year. Their indomitable courage and determination to continue making wine under extremely difficult conditions are deeply moving.

How very different circumstances now are from the 1990s when I first worked with Viacheslav Rybintsev, Director of the Research Institute for Viticulture and Enology Magarach in Yalta (Ukraine); now it is known as the "Federal State Budget Institution for Science and Research "All-Russia National Scientific Research Institute for Wine Growing and Wine Making 'MAGARACH'" of the Russian Academy of Sciences". UK sanctions were placed on it in 2023. Not so far away, Georgia lost the wine making areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to the Russian invasion in 2008. Georgian wines, although not strictly in a conflict zone today, are now quite widely available in the UK, and they are so good that I list one opposite that is well worth trying.

The US and Israeli attack on the Islamic Republic of Iran in February 2026, and the subsequent ongoing hostilities, highlights another case of the complexities of making wine in conflict zones. Persia has a long history of wine-growing, with the wines of Shiraz being highly praised in the 9th century, and Persian poets such as Hafiz in the 14th century frequently proclaimed the close interlacing between love and wine. It has been estimated that there were some 300 wineries in Iran before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and while wine-making is banned today in Iran, people beyond its borders who really want to drink wine made from Iranian grapes can do so once again thanks to the enterprising team who make Mòläna wine in Armenia from Rasheh grapes grown in Sardasht, north-western Iran (see the film *SOMM: Cup of Salvation*).



TIM UNWIN

VINEYARDS IN KAKHETI, GEORGIA

Finally, the example of Palestinian wine-growers under constant threat from the Israeli military and illegal "settlers" is another instance of determination and belief leading to the production of wine under the most trying of conditions. There are 23 indigenous varieties of vine in Palestine. Wines made from these grapes by the Ashkar, Vremisan, Jascala and Taybeh wineries under very difficult conditions are now available in the UK thanks to the enthusiastic team behind Nabeeth.

Unfortunately, but understandably, many wines from conflict zones are hard to find in the UK, and also tend to be expensive, but I hope those listed here provide some ideas of what you might try if you would like to support wine-growers facing extremely difficult decisions on a daily basis in conflict zones. As consumers, we have moral choices to be made over what we buy and from whom and where we buy it.

WINES FROM CONFLICT ZONES
(please drink responsibly)

LOCAL FAVOURITES

☛ **Le Prieuré, Château Ksara (Bekaa Valley, Lebanon) 2021, 13%.** An intriguing wine made from a blend of 30% Carignan, 30% Cinsault, 20% Mourvèdre, and 20% Grenache – the same varieties planted by the property's founding Jesuit fathers in 1857. Unoaked, it combines dark fruit characteristics with slightly spicy notes, and a touch of Mediterranean wild herbs (Laithwaites, £20, **reduced to £18 if you present a copy of this magazine**).

SLIGHTLY FURTHER AFIELD

☛ **Chateau Musar Red (Bekaa Valley, Lebanon) 2019, 14%.** Made with minimal intervention, using wild yeast fermentation and organic practices from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cinsault and Carignan grapes, this classic wine has dark fruit and spicy characteristics and goes particularly well with autumnal game dishes (Majestic, £42 mixed 6, **reduced to £40 if you present a copy of this magazine**).

☛ **Giuanni Saperavi (Kakheti, Georgia) 2024, 13.5%.** Giuanni is my favourite Georgian winery, and won the IWSC Georgian Wine Producer of the Year trophy in 2026. Their basic Saperavi wine is an excellent value introduction to Georgian red wines, with its deep red colour, dark fruit, plums and cherry characteristics and soft tannins balanced by just enough fresh acidity (Georgian Wine Shop, £14.90).

☛ **My wine by Eduard Gorodetsky Merlot (Ukraine) 2024, 13%.** A good example of the potential of Ukraine to make fine wines. This Merlot has supple tannins, and is full of cherry and plum characteristics with a touch of cedar spiciness (The Wine Society, £11.50).



WORTH GOING FURTHER FOR

☛ **Molana Rasheh Dry Red (Iranian grapes made in Armenia) 2021, 14.5%.** Made entirely from Rasheh grapes grown in Sardasht, this rare wine has blackberry, cherry, and sweet spice characteristics, with just a touch of pomegranate; it goes well with grilled lamb (Amathus, £56).

☛ **Bitouni Taybeh (Taybeh Winery, Palestine) 2021, 11.5%.** Made from Bitouni grapes grown in northern Hebron, which produce a wine with dark cherry, plum and wild herb characteristics (Nabeeth, £34.50).

(Wine prices and availability correct at going to press, but are subject to change at short notice)

☛ **Next issue**: Christmas and New Year sparklers