

Romania Awakens

Winemaking giant slow to stir after Soviet occupation passes

By Lana Bortolot

Romanians are quick to point out two things to visitors: One, theirs is a Latin-based language (lest you think they sound too foreign), and, two, their House of Parliament is the second-largest administrative building in the world after the U.S. Pentagon.

What they don't tell you right away is that the country is the seventh-largest wine producer in Europe (and in the world's top 10), that it's an ancient tradition and thanks to some 41.2 million euros in annual support from the European Union, they're bringing the vineyards—sorely neglected when nationalized under the Communist era (1947-1989)—back to their former prestige.

They don't tell you because few Romanians have a wine identity. Under Communist rule, there wasn't much pride of place here. The vineyards were decimated, and what juice was out there wasn't worth drinking. For a long time, your best choices were sweet and sweeter.

Now on the cusp of a renaissance, the wineries are being helped along under the auspices of APEV Romania, the 21-member Wine Exporters' and Producers' Association of Romania, set up in 2001 to facilitate research and education and to help promote the wines at home and abroad. Six wineries have formed a coalition with the intent of educating the trade about the new Romanian wines, and we were in the first group of U.S. tasters invited by Select Wines of Europe to see the revamped operations and sample new wines from this old country.



Rolling Romanian vineyards

At a glance, winemakers are using international varieties as a gateway to the new Romanian wines. And that makes sense. Of the wineries we visited, several have foreign investment, if not ownership. That shows in the gussied-up estates and the hiring of flying winemakers, many from Australia, giving much of what we tasted a New World profile. Vineyards that, under Communism, over-produced or became "field blends" are now fastidiously trel-

(Continued on page 9)

(Continued from page 8)

lised and boast flowering rose bushes at the ends of the rows, a sign that just more than the vines are in good health.

But all of the wineries devote at least some attention to the most promising indigenous varieties, which include *Fetească Neagră*, an earthy and spicy red, and the lighter, fruitier *Băbească Neagră* (“grandmother’s grape”), suggestive of Pinot Noir. Among the whites: *Tămâioasă Românească*, a Muscatel-style wine, the ancient *Fetească Albă* (“white maiden”), which can be dry or semi-dry, and *Fetească Regală*, a dry and acidic crossing between *Grasă* (usually a botrytised wine, a cousin, if you will, of Tokaj) and *Fetească Albă*. There’s also a small market for a local novelty, *Busuioaca de Bohotin*, a Muscat-based rosé made in Moldavia.



Fetească Regală

On the same latitude as Piemonte and Bordeaux, Romanian producers are implementing the same standards in their quality wines as other respected regions. Their production is split evenly between red and white, with white having the slight edge. Some 3,154 hectoliters were produced in 2010—a decreasing trend over the past decade to pump up quality and control. Many producers hand-pick the grapes, give residual sugar levels and barrel aging mindful attention and have cuvées in their portfolios. And some are winning medals for their efforts.

But you can still see the hangover of Communism in some places. In Murfatlar, for instance, which is both a region in southeast Romania near the Black Sea and the name of the largest producer there, the winery is all no-nonsense. Founded in 1955, the campus of huge concrete block buildings doesn’t seem much updated. The property was reclaimed by private enterprise in 2000, which pumped some 50 million euros in improvements, including Australian and French consultants. What it lacks in looks, it makes up for in production: 30 million liters and 23 per cent market share of DOC wines.

“We’ve started producing in small batches of three hectares for niche markets such as hotels and restaurants,” said Dan Domnaru, Murfatlar’s marketing manager. The first premium wines were produced last year. Next up: export to far-flung emerging markets.

Murfatlar has turned out winemakers who are making great strides elsewhere, such as Lorena Deaconu at the U. K.-owned Cramele Halewood in the Prahova Valley. Foreign ownership drives the winery’s international presence. Halewood Romania exports to more than 40 countries. The U.K. is their No. 1 market, followed by Estonia and Germany. Its *Vitis Metamorfosis* brand is a joint venture with Italy’s

(Continued on page 10)

(Continued from page 9)

Marchesi Antinori.

And those resources also enable Deaconu to experiment at home. She is launching wines from single vineyards in the Dealu Mare, Romania's most well-known region for quality wines, trying out screwcap closures. Last year, it produced for the first time both an organic Chardonnay and an organic Shiraz from grapes sourced in Murfatlar. Deaconu is also giving indigenous grapes her attention. Each of the four reserve labels features a Romanian grape, and the *Fetească Neagră* in the Hyperion limited edition wine (DOC Dealu Mare) received numerous medals this year.



Lorena Deaconu

"It's easier to work the local grapes because there isn't anything else to compare, but it's still a matter of education because no one knows about Romanian wines," she says. Other savvy producers with means are hoping to change that, too.

In the Banat region, Cramele Recas has also modernized its wines and its outlook. Owners Philip Cox, a pony-tailed Brit, and his wife, Elvira, a native Romanian who runs the marketing and sales, aren't particularly nostalgic about native grapes. Instead, they're looking for ways to grow their business while putting Romania on the map. Their Australian winemaker worked the world over before coming to Recas.

"We need international-style wines that we can sell in Romania and abroad," Cox says. "We work on the philosophy that whatever the customer wants is right. We offer indigenous varieties, but you can't force people. We have a model: we make what people want and offer a wide variety."

Recas produces 10 million liters a year, more than one million bottles of which make their way into the U.S. where they're targeting large chains. Sam's Club placed an order of 700,000 bottles with just three of the five brands they market, most of which they describe as "gateway" wines. They're not afraid to be flip, marketing a wine called "Pinot Envy" and a Vampire wine.

Cox's approach is opposite what wineries such as Domeniul Coroanei Segarcea wishes to put out there. In fact, you'll be hard-pressed to find its wines in North America. Owner Mihai Anghel doesn't yet have an importer because he's not willing to underprice his wines just to get them on the market. His wines, produced on the immaculately refurbished grounds of an 1884 royal estate, are worth the wait.

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(Continued on page 11)



Anghel family of Segarcea

(Continued from page 10)

here. Deservedly so: the wines are meticulously made by Anghel's wife, Cornelia, a former cardiologist (an irony, given her husband's smoking habit), and she's planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, plus Romanian varieties, too, including the obscure Tamaioasa Roza—the only one of its kind in the world. "It's important to reach consumers, and the first word should be give local varieties, on the condition that they're well made," said Mihai.

Perhaps the most comprehensive collection of Romania's varieties are found in Senator Wines' Monser portfolio devoted to Feteasca Neagra, Babeasca Neagra, Cadarca, Babeasca Gri, Zghihara, Feteasca Regala, Feteasca Alba, Sarba, Tamaioasa Romaneasca and Busuioaca de Bohotin, most of which come from the Husi region near Moldavia.

"Monser is an attempt to bring the wines back to when they were at their peak," says Ciprian Neacsu, who, with his brother, George, runs the winery operations in four locations. Borrowed from Ion Luca Caragiale, a Romanian man of letters (playwright, poet, journalist and short-story writer), the name telegraphs Romania's Bohemian past during La Belle Epoque, as reflected in its motto, translated as "Pure Romanian varieties for bourgeois and thin cheeks." And that largely reflects the way they think about their wines—humbly produced with the "fingerprint of the terroir," but enjoyed by all the classes.

That's an echo of a theme articulated by Segarcea winemaker Cornelia Anghel. "We all have similar thinking about the quality and the respect for the consumer, no matter whether they're French, Romanian or American," she says. 🇷🇴