

MASTER OF WINE WEEKEND 2013 Istanbul, Turkey

“Eat, drink and be merry.”

Hittite king of the 14th century BC

In May 2013, I joined six other Masters of Wine from the U.S. and U.K. for a five-day, multifaceted event in Istanbul. Our mission was to judge Turkish wines, present master classes and “how to export” seminars, give press interviews, and engage in face-to-face meetings with winemakers to discuss their judging results. And, lest I forget, the experience took in a series of gala dinners with journalists and producers at Istanbul’s trendiest restaurants, all with truly spectacular views of city, hills and water. Quite an ambitious program, and distinctly different from the standard wine competition! The location of the judging was a first-rate hotel on Taksim Square, now very much in the news as the focal point of demonstrations.

This was my first opportunity to taste a large number and wide variety of Turkish wines in a comparative blind format. There were those based on international (read French) varieties, grapes you might expect such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. There were also wines from native varieties including such tongue-twisters as Öküzgözü, Bogazkere and Kalecik Karasi (reds) along with Narince (white).

Most wine drinkers are completely unaware that Turkey – particularly the country’s southeastern zone bordering Iraq and Syria – shares the cradle of *Vitis vinifera*. There is evidence of grape domestication going back to 8000 BC. The Hittites who inhabited Anatolia from around 1600 to 1200 BC had a sophisticated wine culture. Extraordinary artifacts have been excavated at their capital, Hattusha, now called Boğazkale, showing that wine was “the beverage of choice in the royal court,” as Patrick E. McGovern explains in *Ancient Wine*. The oft-quoted phrase, “Eat, drink, and be merry,” is credited to a Hittite king of the 14th century BC. There were elaborate banquets featuring multiple storage and drinking vessels, and the service was supervised by the equivalent of a modern sommelier.

Tasting Notes of Roger C. Bohmrich MW

So Turkey can lay claim to an ancient heritage with respect to growing and enjoying wine. At the same time, Turkey is a newcomer to the contemporary and very competitive world market. First, Turkey will need to inform consumers in overseas markets it actually makes wine – which is likely to surprise many drinkers – and prove that the country possesses a bona fide pedigree with historical authenticity. Then, the challenge will be to persuade possible customers that Turkish wines have something to offer and can stand up to established alternatives. My conclusion after the Istanbul judging is that, if Turkish producers are skillful in their marketing strategy, they will in due course carve out their own niche. Familiar wines such as Chardonnay and Cabernet may pave the way, encouraging wine drinkers to buy that first bottle, but the indigenous types are the most intriguing for those willing to discover new tastes. If Greece can find an opening with Moschofilero and Assyrtiko, Turkey can be just as convincing with several of its native varieties. To be successful, it may be a good idea for makers to present an English-language equivalent of their grape names. Öküzgözü, which shows real promise, means “Eye of the Ox” and could conceivably be the successor to Hungary’s Bull’s Blood, but hopefully more enduring in its commercial impact. On the other hand, the direct translation of Bogazkere may not be ideal – “throat burner” is hardly enticing!

I should mention that all wines were rated on the 100-point scale with distinct quality groupings: 95+ for extraordinary wines, 90-94 for outstanding, 85-89 for very good, 80-84 for good, 75-79 for average, and 74 and less for below average. Moreover, the judges were required to write (sometimes scribble, given the tempo!) a tasting note, and I have to say in retrospect that copies of the notes are particularly informative, allowing me to share my real-time comments. The written word proves that a number alone is not enough to tell the full story! Unfortunately, I did not receive a complete file of all the wines entered in the competition. Nevertheless, despite a few gaps I have been able to piece together the identities of the majority of my 90-plus wines. By the way, I rated 29 entries at this level, roughly 9% of the total of 320 wines. That’s a rather positive statement about Turkish wines!

My highest score was 93, awarded to three red wines, all of which happen to be Bordeaux blends grown in Thrace on the European side of Turkey. I also found others relying on international grapes coming from this area, and specifically the Gallipoli peninsula, which were deserving of an “outstanding”

Tasting Notes of Roger C. Bohmrich MW

score. There may well be a terroir argument for Gallipoli, at least for certain cultivars. Overall, the international types were, however, more uneven than the Turkish ones; with few exceptions, the latter fell into a fairly narrow band between “good” and “very good.” The favorable assessments underline the intrinsic appeal of local varieties regardless of how challenging they may be to pronounce! Five of my top wines were based on Turkish varieties. My sense is that the other judges came away with essentially the same conclusion.

Many of my highest rated wines were Bordeaux blends, not really a surprise since this style is treated as a benchmark, image-defining red at many wineries in Turkey and so many other countries. A few joined a Rhône grape to the mix as is commonly seen in Australia. Interestingly, five of my outstanding selections were from a single winery, Barbare, whose vineyards are certified organic and biodynamic. I must have appreciated the results as my scores were on average somewhat higher than those of the other judges. But since everything was blind, and I had never tasted any of the Barbare wines before, there is no denying there was something very convincing in the glass. Perhaps my enthusiasm was due to the “international” profile of the wines? This could apply as well to the other blends which compared favorably to global benchmarks. It should also be noted that the winners include some of Turkey’s best known wineries and, significantly, its home-grown varieties – which do not have exact equivalents elsewhere.

Judges were not told the composition of the red blends at the time of the judging, and they were coded variously as BDX, RBB, BRB or GSM. Two wines listed here were tasted twice under different code numbers as a control of the judges’ consistency.

As I write this article, I am thinking of the unrest in Turkey and the sentiment to restrict the sale of alcohol in one manner or another. The government is trying to establish yoghurt-based *ayran* as the preferred national beverage. As things stand, Turkish wine consumption is extremely low, about one liter per person. If limitations are imposed on Turkey’s wine industry at home, external outlets will become not merely desirable but critical if the country’s wineries are to survive, let alone prosper. Those of us who love wine can only wish Turkey’s winemakers the best and hope they come through this difficult period unharmed. Wine drinkers may be surprised by what Turkey has to offer!

Here are notes for most of my top-scoring wines in Istanbul:

Barbare Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlot 2010 – 93 points

Dense very dark red. Youthfully reserved to the nose, very subtle yet with good concentration and depth and carefully integrated oak. Concentrated on the palate with a very attractive polished undertone. Subtle, youthful fruit-oak highlights. Very well balanced finish showing ripe acidity, well integrated into the wine's flesh. Ripe tannins. Has excellent composition and a classic profile. Will improve.

Yazgan "Vodina" 2011 (52% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Syrah, 18% Merlot from vineyards near Izmir) – 93 points

Dense black with purple. Clean, ripe, youthful and attractive nose exhibiting sweet black fruits and berries. There is lovely maturity and warm lift. The palate show beautiful, pronounced black berry fruit, and it is juicy, alive and very young. The finish is very dry, yet reveals a very appealing ripe berry fruit undertone. Quite long if young.

Château Kalpak 2010 (Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc & Petit Verdot coming from vineyards on Gallipoli exposed to two seas, the Aegean and Marmara) – 93 points

Opaque black with purple. Ripe youthful black fruit with a sweet tone. Dense, with well-integrated oak. The palate is ripe, composed and full. Has flesh and presence. The aftertaste is marked by ripe acidity and tannin. There is sweet, persistent fruit and oak spice. Very well-balanced and integrated. Has keeping potential.

Suvla "Sur" 2010 (Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc & Petit Verdot from Gallipoli) – 92 points

Dense dark red with brick rim. Rather mature initial expression for 2010. Very attractive cedar and tobacco with fine red fruit. The palate is composed with a lovely clean feel. It is medium plus in weight and delivers restrained complexity. The finish presents a fresh and still youthful structure yet is developing early maturity of expression. The wine offers very attractive nuance and classic Bordeaux styling.

Barbare Premier Blend 2009 (30% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Syrah, 20% Merlot & 20% Grenache) – 92 points

Dense very dark red with slightly purple rim. The aroma is soft and reserved but reveals very good concentration along with ripe dark fruits and a creamy quality. In the mouth, this wine is concentrated, intense, poised and still young. The finish shows promising complexity and is very intense. The wine possesses excellent dimension and demands keeping.

Barbare Prestige 2010 (70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 27% Merlot, 2% Syrah & 1% Grenache) – 92 points

Opaque black red with purple rim. The nose has ripeness and depth while remaining subdued and youthful. There is well-integrated fruit and oak and subtle notes of spice and cedar. The palate has concentration and reserve together with an excellent core. Well-integrated with a youthful, layered expression. The finish is well-structured but not aggressive, and there is very good persistence. The wine offers youthful nuances and tertiary notes. Balanced, with very good aging potential.

Kavaklidere “Pendore” Öküzgözü 2010 (from the village of Kemaliye in the Aegean district at the juncture of continental and Mediterranean influences) – 92 points

Opaque black with thin purple rim. The nose is dense and closed, hinting at substantial dark fruit. The palate is large-scaled, powerful and chewy. Backward with a very subtle fleshy undertone. The finish is undeveloped. The structure is well matched to the fruit and flesh. Well-balanced and will keep well.

[This wine won the Regional Trophy at the 2012 Decanter World Wine Awards.]

Yazgan Öküzgözü 2012 – 91 points

Dense black with purple. Warm, subtle youthful dark fruit in the aroma. Very clean. The attack is similarly clean as well as textured and medium full. The wine is composed and relatively accessible. The aftertaste is held back, yet displays balance and an integrated structure. Clean, well-made. Opens and reveals more at the end.

Suvla Chardonnay Reserve 2011 – 91 points

Light gold. Creamy and toasty nose revealing ripe fruit. The palate is generous and textured, delivering richness and flourish. The wine finishes ripe and warm with integrated acidity.

Likya “Arykanda” Chardonnay 2011 – 91 points

Light yellow gold. The nose is bright and clean with very good intensity, yet without exaggeration, and shows stony, lemon peel notes. On the palate, the wine possesses lovely integration and mouth-feel along with precision and complexity. There is finely calibrated acidity carrying the flavors. Understated but not lacking intensity. Elegant, expressive finale.

Kavaklidere Prestige Kalecik Karasi 2009 – 90 points

Moderately dense black red with purple rim. The aroma is warm and ripe with sweet dark red fruits. Fairly generous. The wine delivers attractive fruit and flesh and very good substance, gaining in dimension across the palate. The finish is just developing, and the fleshiness persists in the aftertaste. Warm with attractive fruit qualities and well-calibrated acidity at the conclusion.

Barbare Prestige 2009 (70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 27% Merlot, 2% Syrah & 1% Grenache) – 90 points

Opaque black with red rim. The nose delivers youthful intensity and concentrated black fruits together with well-integrated oak. The palate exhibits a concentrated core of fruit and is still quite youthful, with subtle complexity. The finish is still well-defined, fresh and presents structure in balance. Attractive underlying texture and budding complexity at the end. Classic styling, will develop.

Barbare Elegance 2010 (53% Grenache, 25% Syrah, 19% Mourvèdre, 2% Cabernet Sauvignon & 1% Merlot) – 90 points

Dense dark red. Focused nose displaying good integration and intensity, with small red fruits and toast accents. The palate is focused, well-knit and expressive, offering high-toned oak-fruit highlights with a layered quality. There is a fresh acid frame, and the wine has very good length and early complexity. There are toasted and spice notes and very good ending intensity.

Kavaklidere “Yakut” 2011 (Öküzgözü, Bogazkere, Carignan & Alicante from both Aegean and Eastern Anatolia) – 90 points (tasted twice, identical score)

Moderately dense black purple. Very clean aroma, focused with expressive dark fruits and berries. Very clean palate, focused and composed offering youthful dark red fruit. Somewhat lighter in weight. Very persistent for a young wine with attractive fruit and real finishing intensity. Dry, fresh ending.

Tasting Notes of Roger C. Bohmrich MW

Suvla Chardonnay 2012 – 90 points

Bright yellow gold. Penetrating, intense aroma showing toasty notes and a ripe lemon scent. The palate delivers ripe, restrained fruit and shows good integration and concentration. The finish is balanced with clean defining acidity. Has finesse and poise.

Château Kalpak Cabernet Franc 2010 (with some Merlot) – 89 points

Dense very dark red with thin purple rim. The aroma is clean and reserved, offering good maturity and a faint leafy aspect. The taste is restrained and youthful and offers lovely fruit quality and integrated oak. The wine finishes clean and has a well-calibrated structure with a fine acid spine. There is youthful persistence and noteworthy harmony and elegance.

Kavaklidere “Ancyra” Öküzgözü 2012 – 89 points (tasted twice, one point apart)

Dense black with purple rim. Clean, fresh nose revealing primary black fruits with attractive maturity and very good concentration. Opens more with airing. Concentrated and youthfully reserved on the palate with black fruits and flesh at the core. The finish is undeveloped and very well-balanced with a polished feel. Clean structure of ripe acidity and moderate tannin. Has potential.