

Ancient wine culture is born again

The Grapevine
Darren Gall

IN the cradle of human civilization, in the fertile Beqaa Valley, amidst ancient ruins, you will find what is believed to be the world's oldest winemaking site.

Evidence from ancient Rome shows wine was domesticated in Lebanon at least two thousand years before Alexander the Great. Vines were cultivated by the Phoenicians in the land of Canaan, the coastal strip of Lebanon, and the wines of Byblos were exported to Egypt during the Old Kingdom (2686 BC-2134 BC). The Phoenicians were the first traders of wines and the wines of Tyre and Sidon were famous throughout the ancient Mediterranean.

Wine played an important part in Phoenician religion, and the Greek/Roman god Bacchus/Dionysus may have originated in the wine rituals of Canaan. The great temple at Heliopolis (Baalbek) has many depictions of vines and wine drinking. Such rituals may also have influenced the Greek Bacchae, the Jewish Passover Seder feast and the Christian Eucharist.

Genesis 14:18 mentions that the Phoenician King Melchizedek gave bread and wine (*yayin*) to Abraham, and Hosea 14:8 suggests "his fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon". Wine also featured heavily in Ugaritic poetry such as the Rapiuma: "Day long they pour the wine... must-wine, fit for rulers. Wine, sweet and abundant, Select

wine... The choice wine of Lebanon, Most nurtured by El."

Winemaking largely declined once Lebanon became part of the Caliphate, although it was still tolerated for religious purposes. The winemaking revival in Lebanon began in 1857 when Jesuit Monks planted the Rhone variety Cinsault, (brought from Algeria) at Chateau Ksara in Zahle. In 1930, the irrepressible Gaton

Hochar established Chateau Musar, internationally still Lebanon's most famous winery. The winery and Hochar gained worldwide notoriety for running harvested grapes through the front lines of the Lebanese civil war, which separated vineyard from the winery.

Apart from Hochar there have been other pioneers such as Yves Morard, the ageing hippy wine maker, formerly of Kefraya winery

and now at Cave Kouroum. Yves' looks got him arrested by the Israeli Army during the 1982 invasion and taken to Tel Aviv, where he was forced to sit through a wine exam to prove he was who he claimed to be.

Between the two World Wars, French influence and the sophisticated, cosmopolitan culture of Beirut promoted domestic wine consumption, which has not abated despite the interruption of civil war (1975-1990). Today, Lebanon produces over 600,000 cases of wine, mostly from the Rhone Valley varieties of Cinsault and Carignan along with the Bordeaux varieties of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. However, there are also ancient, indigenous varieties such as Obaideh and Merwah.

The best of Lebanon's wines come from Kefraya, Ksara, Chateau Musar and Massaya along with Clos St. Thomas. A good selection of the wines from Kefraya and Ksara are currently being imported by the folks at Le Cedre restaurant, where you can enjoy them with an impressive selection of authentic Lebanese cuisine - the perfect place in Phnom Penh to experience the impressive and enjoyable wines of Lebanon.

Le Cedre restaurant is located at No. 1, Street 360, Phnom Penh, whilst they also have a smaller balcony restaurant on the riverside at No. 383, Sisowath Quay, Royal Khmer Hotel.



Workers harvest grapes at a Massaya vineyard in the Beqaa valley, Lebanon's 3,000-foot-high, prime wine region 30 miles east of Beirut. BLOOMBERG NEWS

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