

ROMANIA

An embryonic WINE industry

Aventis Vineyards



Recas Vineyards

My memory of Romanian wine were a few decent Pinot Noir's from the Dealu Mare region tasted back in the 1990's when wines from central Europe had more distribution in this part of the world. Romanian wine then fell off the radar, rendered invisible by the rise and rise of wines from the new world especially during the 1990's and into the noughties. That said a recent visit to Romania has re-acquainted me with a European wine country that has enormous potential and a story to tell.

We flew to Timișoara one of Romania's largest cities in Timiș one of the largest counties in western Romania situated close to the Hungarian and Serbian border. Our first stop was a visit with Englishman Philip Cox at his Cramele Recas winery. Philip, originally from Bristol started working for Kenderman, a German wine company back in the early 1990's. His job involved buying bulk wine from Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania for the company. He got to know the area pretty

well and in 1994 Kenderman appointed him MD of their Romanian set up with a brief to make wine to a specification using flying winemakers. 1993 was the first vintage and from there they built up an extensive business in Romania.

By 1996 Philip saw the potential for Romanian wine and decided to set up his own business, he rented the winery at Recas with a view to producing varietal wines for the UK market. The structure of the Romanian wine industry at that time was pretty haphazard. After the 1989 revolution no one really knew who owned the land. A programme was initiated to return the land to its original owners from the pre-communist days. It was an uncertain time, because of the land owning issues no one really invested in or planted new grapes. So from 1985 to 2005 no new vines were planted in Romania and wine was made from international varietals which had been there for some time.

Philip, together with his Romania wife Elvira started their business by acquiring a

lease to buy option on 100 ha granted over a five year period. With money from a group of investors they dug up vineyards, replanted and upgraded the winery. In order to keep the cash flow moving they had to sell a hell of a lot of wine, which Philip, with his energy and inherent sales ability was able to achieve. Philip who has a strong commercial head on his shoulders re-invested all the income to re-plant a range of French varietals that he knew would have appeal in the U.K. He also started to plant some of the local varieties for the Romanian market.

Today Cramele Recas is the biggest selling Romanian wine company on the UK market with sales of over 300,000 cases per annum. Their wines feature strongly in many c-stores and supermarkets and they have also expanded into other markets such as Holland, Ireland and Belgium. On the home market they are the biggest producer in value terms and the best known for local grape varieties.

JEAN SMULLEN



The team at Recas Wines

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By 2014 the company had sales of 10 million bottles annually with 4.8 million of those heading for the export market. Bag in Box is another huge seller for them on the Romanian market, particularly in the restaurant sector. They now bottle on a 24 hour basis and this year expect sales on the international market to grow by 40%.

The day of our visit Philip, who had just got off a plane from China, was brimming with energy and passion, despite jet lag and an eight hour flight. The Chinese trip was a successful one and he is hoping to launch his wine into a Chinese supermarket chain with 35,000 outlets. In 20 years he has put Romanian wine firmly on the global wine map. A visionary with a keen business focus, his very comprehensive range of Cramele Recas wines are now widely available throughout the UK in Waitrose, Asda and Sainsbury. An on-trade range of Cramele Recas wines are distributed in the UK by Alliance, Adnams and Forth Wines.

Our next stop was the Salonul Rovinhdud at the Hotel Timișoara. With 24 exhibitors, the event was open to both trade and consumer guests with all proceeds being donated to people with disabilities. This is the second year of the Rovinhdud Fair, the organisers were enormously proud that in year one, Jancis Robinson MW attended and gave good reviews for many of the wines she tasted. This year, with over 205 wines to taste and 8 master classes given by 3 MW's including Julia Harding MW, Caroline Gilbey MW and Yiannis Karakasis MW the event was well attended.

A quick tasting around the room showed the enormous potential of the emerging Romanian wine industry. Many of the producers were small boutique wineries but the quality was very much in evidence. Many of the wineries are not yet available in the UK but look out for Prince Stirby www.stirby.com Roy & Dambovicioaneanu Cordova www.corcova.ro Lilac – the Wines of Transylvania www.lilac.com SERVE www.clubulcavalerilor.ro and Vinarte www.vinarte.ro

We flew from Timișoara to Bucharest, before embarking on a four hour drive to the region of Drăgășani in Romania's Vâlcea County on the banks of the Olt River, a Danube tributary. To the north are the Carpathian Hills and further south is the Wallachian plain. We were here to visit Vila Dobrușa, the family estate of Valeriu and



Cristiniana Stocia situated on the top of a hill close to the 15th century Dobrușa Monastery. Arriving late at night, the next morning I was intrigued by the incredible view, the historic and modern architecture and their family story which epitomises modern Romania.

Valeriu Stocia, a professor of law was once head of the Romanian Liberal Party and was for a time Minister for Justice.

Christiana his wife, whose family were the original owners of the estate is also involved in the legal profession and she specialises in corporate law. Christiana's great grandmother Maria Râmniceanu built up the wine estate after the death of her husband Iancu, at a relatively young age. The original villa dates back to 1914 and is built in neo-Romanian style. After the communist revolution the estate was confiscated and became a state farm. After the end of communism, Christina Stocia had quite a battle on her hands, but she persevered and using all her legal acumen succeeded in having all the land restored to her family. She and Valeriu then bought out the remaining family members and acquired full ownership of her grandmother's estate. They decided to restore the family mansion and to create a modern cellar. They commissioned Aleandru Beldiman to create an original work of modern architecture

for their working wine cellar. Situated on the top of the Drăgășani Hill the walls are limestone and the building is discreetly built into the landscape of its hill surroundings. An impressive state of the art winery lies beneath and the building and the original house are now surrounded by vineyards.

This is the future of the Romanian wine industry – of course to make a small fortune in the wine industry you first must start with a large one: the Stocia's have invested many millions of euros to create their vision. Their winery produces approximately 150,000 bottles of quality wine per annum which they sell under 13 different labels. They have employed a young French winemaker from Alsace, Ghislain Morit – a 26 year old graduate of Dijon University who has worked in Burgundy and Portugal – to make their wine. Ghislain and his Colombian wife work closely with the Stocia family. Since his arrival two years ago, Ghislain has been working hard, with viticulturist Gheorghe Lixandru, to introduce sustainable viticulture to the region.

The quality of their wines was, of course, outstanding – the Alsatian influence shines through, especially in terms of the quality of the white wines. Pinot Noir is a key red grape in this area and is grown

RECOMMENDED WINES

CRAAMEL RECAS

2015 Calusari Chardonnay

(Alliance Wines)

Using staves, this is a modern Chardonnay with lovely pure fruit and some wood influence. Subtle and appealing.

2015 Chardonnay/Fetească Regală

(Forth Wines)

A 50/50 blend of Chardonnay and the native white Fetească Regală grape. This was a wonderfully floral wine with a very distinctive appeal.

2015 Paparuda Pinot Noir (Adnams)

Lovely vegetal nose, smoky with cherry fruit, soft and very drinkable. A good value Pinot Noir with a lot of class!

AVINCIS (THEATRE OF WINE)

2014 Crâmpoșie Selectionată

Beautifully floral and fresh, this is a thick skinned grape which can be sensitive to oxidation. Made with a light touch it was very elegant and floral with a very subtle elegant finish. Very well made, something completely different, definitely worth trying!

2013 Pinot Gris & Fetească Regală

This was the wine of the tasting for me, a Silver Medal winner at the 2015 Concours Mondial de Bruxelles this wine was wonderfully balanced. Made from 70% Pinot Gris and 30% Fetească Regală the wine was aged for 10 months in French oak barrels. Made from old vines the aromatic characteristic of the native white grape shone through, floral with yellow fruit and a good fresh acidity, this was an outstanding wine.

2011 Pinot Noir

This wine was aged in French oak barrels for 14 months. Quite smoky on the nose lots of black cherry fruit, soft tannin all of which was beautifully balanced. The vines are relatively young but the potential for Pinot Noir from this region is very evident from this wine.



nearby. Ghislain's experience of working with Burgundian producers is also in evidence – the Avincis Pinot Noir was outstanding. As well as the French varietals, they also have a range of wines made from indigenous grapes – these include Crâmpoșie Selectionată, a local grape variety from Drăgășani; a Fetească Regală/Pinot Gris blend; and a white made from the native Tămâioasă Românească and Muscat Ottonel. The red grapes include Pinot Noir, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, as well as Negru de Drăgășani – a native red grape from Drăgășani region.

My overall impression is of an embryonic wine industry with enormous potential. Having emerged from the communist era, the country and the wine industry are struggling to catch up. But catch up they will; with visionaries like Philip Cox and the Stocia family, I have no doubt that before too long, many will be beating a path to their door in search of their quality well-made wines especially those made from the native grape varieties.

Vila Dobrușa sell their wine in the UK under the Avincis label – an amalgamation of family names – through Theatre of Wine in Greenwich and Islington. www.theatreofwine.com