



Heard about but not seen

Romanian wine is poised for a UK comeback, but industry members lament the lack of visibility and promotion within the category. *Rupert Millar reports*

WHILE THE future of Romanian wine is bright, there are still hurdles to be overcome. Despite huge leaps forward in quality and renewed enthusiasm and energy being focused on exporting to markets such as the UK, Eastern European countries are struggling to make themselves known to the consumer.

Even more tellingly, trade members, the gatekeepers upon whose judgment all wines must pass, are not being introduced to this increasingly interesting corner of the wine world.

As the roundtable hosted by *the drinks business* in the Romanian Cultural Institute begins, Christine Parkinson, group wine buyer for Hakkasan, after tasting the wines and being surprised by their quality, laments that at no point in all her years in the industry has anyone ever approached her and suggested she list Romanian wine: "I wish we had some Romanian wines in the on-trade," she states.

"The frustrating thing for me, especially after tasting some of them, is that I have yet to be offered Romanian wine. Clearly the distribution isn't quite reaching the fine-dining market that we're in."

Wine writer Jamie Goode adds that Romania has often been under his radar as a wine-producing country and no-one has ever offered him the chance to go there and see what is happening for himself. He adds that he has been to the region but back in 1990 with an aid convoy after the fall of Ceausescu and clearly much has changed in the wine industry since then.

"Romania has not been on my radar at all. I've not tasted many Romanian wines, no-one's ever come to me with a story on Romanian wine that makes me think, 'this is interesting'," he says.

One panel member, Paul Evans of Rumpus Communications, who has been working with producers The Romanian Winegrowers to help them break back into the competitive UK market, explains that part of the problem now is that the European Union places severe limitations on the promotion of wines within Europe. So while the US is receiving millions of euros to promote the country,

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there are few funds left for anyone else.

However, he continues that the UK is seen as "the" market to crack: "The UK is still seen as a big shop window for wine and it's important that wines are seen on UK shelves and in UK restaurants."

EU funding has emerged in the form of grants to improve the agricultural structures of countries such as Romania and millions of euros have been ploughed into new vines and equipment for the wineries.

Wine journalist Caroline Gilby MW has witnessed "the fruits of all that investment in the last few years. Technology, particularly in the vineyards, is starting to come through in the wines, which are a lot better".

Marie O'Riordan, national accounts manager at Chalié Richards, admits: "It's fair to say that the wines originally coming in were from the old vineyards and were not of great quality. Now it's the new era, all those vines have been grubbed up and it's all about quality."

Lack of awareness

One problem Romania needs to overcome is communicating its native varieties from a consumer awareness base that, put simply, doesn't exist.

Cat Lomax, assistant buyer at Direct Wines, suggests blends as one way to approach the consumer with indigenous varieties. Their main appeal is that they offer the consumer "a level of familiarity and a reference point for actually understanding the wine".

In the short term it may be the best way of introducing these varieties in a way that, "isn't too overwhelming".

That said, Lomax also raises the point that independents such as Direct Wines have the chance to hand-sell products. "The indigenous varieties give companies the opportunity to actually tell a story to their customers about why this is special, about why it is so different, about why it is something unique that you can only find in Romania," she asserts.

Parkinson agrees saying that once sommeliers are given the chance to offer new and different things they embrace them enthusiastically.

ROMANIA ROUNDTABLE



L-r: Caroline Gilby MW, Marie O'Riordan

"It's always great in a hand-sell situation when you can take a customer and give them a taste adventure," she says.

Evans and Gilby also comment that many wine societies are looking for new offerings.

"Wine societies are often more amenable to Eastern Europe than big buyers," announces Gilby.

"They're interested in the stories behind the indigenous grape varieties and there's a real fondness for the stuff they drank 15 years ago. 'What happened to Bulgaria?' 'What happened to Romania?' 'We really used to enjoy those wines', they say."

Goode agrees that stories sell wine and help build a positive image of a country, but argues that there has to be a methodical approach to presenting these wines to consumers. "To be heard in the UK market you have to be ruthless," he warns. "You have to say to the producers, 'This year we're

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going to run with these stories and develop them and create a bridgehead'."

He also suggests that any future trade tastings should be focused on particular regions or grape varieties, which he believes would better entice industry figures than generic Romania events.

Parkinson concurs: "If one grape variety leads into the on-trade first it tends to grow interest that much more. Grüner Veltliner is a great example. Nobody had heard of it a few years ago, now nobody would be without it."

Goode continues in a practical vein when talking about marketing Romania in general to the wine-buying masses.

"Stories about regionality are irrelevant at the bottom end of the market," he asserts. "People shop in the supermarkets to buy wine and its most significant feature will be that the wine is Romanian."

Crucially he says that while the packaging

has improved, it: "Still isn't there. It doesn't say Romania on the front of the bottle. It's got too many funny words, too many odd words."

While the packaging may be found wanting he has praise for its contents: "If the wine is packaged right you could see it getting a good price in an independent merchant," he predicts. "The label is the interface between the wine and the consumer."

Then comes talk of listings and price points. Evans has identified the independent sector as probably his best possible ally in promoting the idea of a new, rejuvenated Romania, but also knows there are producers within the Romanian Winegrowers group that can provide the supermarkets with the quantities they need. "Independents with loyal customers have a dialogue with them and can promote our wines," he says. "Supermarkets are looking for quality at a good price and I think we have producers capable of doing that."

Gilby states that the Romanian producers need to start thinking about categories and where they can enter the market: "As well as niche and interesting you've got to have the big guys like Recas and Halewood who can deliver fair value at the commodity end of the market," she says.

Goode goes on to say that in the modern marketplace it is the lower £5 end of the market and the higher £10+ end that need to be addressed: "The middle ground is just disappearing now," he announces. "If you've got a £9 wine from Romania in the supermarkets your sales are going to be practically zero."

He says that the countries that have had the most success are those with this dual approach.

Lomax counters this, arguing that there is a place for £7 to £9 wines as they can be used to trade consumers up when they have started at entry level.

She believes that once consumers have been shown how good Romanian wine can be for £5 or £6 a bottle then they can be coaxed into buying something a little more expensive.

ROMANIAN WINEGROWERS

The Romanian Winegrowers is an independent body made up of a group of the leading wine producers throughout Romania, spanning several key regions. It was established in 2009 to redress trade opinion of Romanian wines and challenge the trade to put Romania back on the buying agenda. Members include:

Halewood International
Cramele Recas
Domeniile Sahateni
Senator

www.romanian-winegrowers.com

SERVE
Stirbey
Vinarte
Wine Princess



Clockwise, l-r: Jamie Goode, Marie O'Riordan, Paul Evans, Jane Parkinson, Christine Parkinson, Cat Lomax, Rachael Burke, Rupert Millar

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"That's where Australia has got itself into a bit of a tangle," she says.

"It focused its energy on the really big branded entry-level wines and now is trying to get across this message of regionality and why Australia can do £10-

£15 bottles of wine, when people have got this perception that they should always be able to buy Australian wine at three for a tenner."

There is no doubt that Romania has to shake off its negative images, such as poverty and its communist heritage. It is taking its wine industry seriously again and there are those that are prepared to take it seriously, but it has been out of the export market for a long time now.

As Romania takes its baby steps in the UK market it will have to face all the pitfalls and pratfalls that come with it and it will have to adapt.

Progress is being made. Press trips are planned and supermarkets are asking for samples as a result of the London Wine Fair. Things are, slowly but surely, getting off the ground.

One hurdle, though, as ever, is getting the distribution network up and running. Until that is done, all talk is just that, superfluous – after all, how can anyone taste a new Romania if they can't get their hands on it?db