

# An adventure in Lebanese wine: Part Two

Encountering the dry heat, geography and geology of the Beqaa Valley gives an insight into the character of Massaya Faqra wines



The terrace at the Massaya Faqra winery - the complex also houses several restaurants serving excellent local cuisine

WHERE TO FIND ^

Chez Louis, +961-985 3353. [Hedonism Wines](#), 020-7290 7870; [hedonism.co.uk](#). Hotel Albergo, 137 Rue Abdel Wahab El Inglizi, Beirut (+961-133 9797; [albergobeirut.com](#)). Massaya Faqra, President Lahoud Roundabout, Kfardebian (+961-932 2778; [massaya.com](#)). Roberts & Speight, 01482-870 717; [robertsandspeight.co.uk](#). Slurp, 01295-672 290; [slurp.co.uk](#). Tanners, [tanners-wines.co.uk](#).

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Rather than staying in downtown [Beirut](#) (where boutique Hotel Albergo comes highly recommended), I headed to Faqra in the foothills of Mount Lebanon and was billeted at the Ghosn family chalet beneath the pistes of the Mzaar ski resort and next to their Massaya winery’s extraordinary mountain facility.

At 1,700m above sea level, Massaya Faqra is one of the world’s highest [wineries](#). Backed by snow-capped peaks it commands extraordinary vistas that, on one of Lebanon’s 300 annual days of sunshine, go clear past the highest surviving Roman temple to the coast. While most of the estate’s production takes place over the mountains at Massaya Tanaïl in the Beqaa Valley, Massaya’s whites are vinified here and barrels of red are aged in cellars carved into the mountain. The complex, completed in summer 2014, also houses several restaurants, whose exceptional [locally sourced cuisine](#) ably demonstrates why Beirut is increasingly considered one of the world’s gastronomic capitals.



A powerful-tasting red wine: Terrasses de Baalbeck (£19.80 per bottle, available from Tanners)

On my first night, Sami Ghosn, Massaya’s co-founder, took me with his family to their favourite [seafood restaurant](#), Chez Louis, on the seafront at Jounieh for a late catch-of-the-day lunch. The highlight was whole seabass, barely hours out of the water, consumed whole and, at our host’s insistence, with fingers only, bones sucked clean. Rosé was the order of the day, interspersed with glasses of Massaya’s famous and increasingly compelling *arak* (£31.95 for a 500ml bottle, available from Slurp) before returning to our mountain base.

The following day, at Massaya Faqra, I meet Sami’s brother Ramzi, now Massaya’s winemaker but also an enthusiastic, questing chef. Forced to leave Lebanon during the worst of the civil war, Ramzi ended up running restaurants in France, while Sami worked as an architect in the United States. Both returned to Lebanon in the 1990s and, in order to restore and maintain the property in Tanail where they grew up, began producing *arak* on the estate. The distinctive dark-blue bottle that houses this fierce spirit is the colour of twilight, which is what Massaya means in Arabic. As Ramzi puts it, “When the sun sets behind the mountain, the sky turns dark blue, the temperature drops and you fancy a drink.”

The vines here were planted in 2008 and, with new partners Dominique Hebrard, formerly of Cheval Blanc, and Frédéric and Daniel Brunier of Vieux Télégraphe in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Massaya began a new chapter that would propel it to international renown. Daniel Brunier had come over from [France](#) during my visit to help with the vinification of the 2016 vintage. “Lebanon is my oxygen,” he said after a day of blending in the Beqaa Valley, which lies 1,000m above sea level between Mount Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon mountains, on the Syrian border. The 100-mile ranges provide shelter but also a good source of meltwater from their snowy peaks to irrigate this otherwise arid and blustery valley, where there is no rain between April and September. Free from frost and disease, the best clay and limestone vineyards are on the lower slopes, full of white stones.

Traditionally the estate’s top wine, the cabernet-based Massaya Reserve 2011 (£43.99 per bottle, available from Roberts & Speight) is intense, meaty and richly structured with gamey and peppery notes from the supporting mourvèdre and syrah, but with a vein of cool acidity that maintains freshness. Sami suggests, however, that in the dry heat of the Beqaa, cabernet has a tendency to develop thick skin and insufficient juice, while Daniel adds that “cinsault is at its best here – the journey is one from power to elegance, and everyone is on it”.

Together with Brunier’s experience in the Rhône, this may help to explain why Massaya’s more recent blends have been taking on a more distinctly southern French rather than Bordelais character; from the charming cinsault and grenache-dominant Colombier (£15.10 per bottle, available from Hedonism Wines) with its nose of red berries, forest fruits and sandalwood, alongside a spicy, darker fruit palate and ripe yet herbaceous tannins, through to the powerful Terrasses de Baalbeck (£19.80 per bottle, available from Tanners), a classic GSM (grenache, syrah and mourvèdre blend), full of dark chocolate, cedar, iodine, coffee, red earth and black cherries.

*Come back on Monday May 8 for part three. Read [part one here](#). Tom Harrow is a fine wine commentator, consultant and presenter. His [Grand Crew Classé](#) is the ultimate invitation-only club for fine wine enthusiasts, with exclusive access to rare bottles and events around the world. [twitter.com/winechapuk](#). To read more of his columns, click [here](#).*