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WINE SCHOOL

Turmoil, Strife and Wine: Reds From Lebanon



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By Eric Asimov

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With the pandemic and all the damage it has done to economies, businesses and personal relations, and the daily consequences of climate change, 2020 has been a difficult year for wine in general.

But few places in the world have faced the onslaught of obstacles that have challenged the wine industry of Lebanon.

The country has been in an economic and political crisis for several years, which made life difficult even before Covid-19. The huge and damaging [explosion](#) that rocked Beirut on Aug. 4 was the latest national trauma.

The Lebanese people ordinarily consume about eight million bottles of wine annually, half of which are Lebanese and the rest imported, said Marc Hochar, whose family owns Chateau Musar, the leading Lebanese producer, which achieved renown for its wines under his father, [Serge Hochar](#).

Because the currency has been devalued, Mr. Hochar said, Lebanon can no longer afford imported goods, which has heightened the demand for locally produced wines. But the cost of materials required by the industry, like machinery, glass and labels, has gone up as well, and because of the economic conditions wine producers cannot raise their own prices to cover those expenses.

Mr. Hochar called it “a very bizarre situation.”

The Lebanese wine industry has had to demonstrate its resilience for decades, most famously navigating through 15 years of civil war. When the war ended in 1990, just five wineries were operating in Lebanon. As of 2018 there were roughly 50.

Most of the Lebanese wine production is centered in the [Bekaa Valley](#) in the east, near the border of Syria, but another region in northern Lebanon around [Batroun](#) has been growing as well.

The three red wines I suggest are all from the Bekaa Valley. They are:

[Massaya](#) Bekaa Valley Le Colombier 2018 (Winebow, New York) \$15

[Chateau Musar](#) Bekaa Valley Musar Jeune 2018 (Broadbent Selections, Sonoma, Calif.) \$20

[Domaine des Tourelles](#) Bekaa Valley Cinsault Vieilles Vignes 2017 (RC Distributors, Cleveland) \$24

You can sense the influence of France, which controlled Lebanon roughly from the end of World War I until the country achieved independence in 1943.

Aside from their place of origin, the wines are not all that similar. The Massaya is made of grenache, cinsault and tempranillo; the Musar Jeune of cinsault, syrah and cabernet sauvignon and the Tourelles solely of cinsault.

If you cannot find these wines, try any Lebanese wines you do come across, even the whites, which are often made with the indigenous grapes obaideh and merwah. If you don't mind a splurge and can find an older bottle of Chateau Musar — Musar Jeune is the budget-priced, entry-level wine — you are in for a treat. These are idiosyncratic but wholly distinctive.

“To understand Lebanon is not easy,” Serge Hochar [told me in 2012](#), when he was visiting New York. “The dimension of taste in Lebanon is different than anywhere else. Not better, but different. Better has no meaning.”

The idea this month is not so much to compare the wines as to see if we can sense a Lebanese difference. And, while 2020 has been challenging for all of us, maybe we can spare a few thoughts for the people of Lebanon as well.

“Wine is above politics,” Serge Hochar also said in 2012. “Wine is tolerance.”