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WINE SCHOOL

From Lebanon, Bottles That Reward Diving Below the Surface



Credit...Pepe Serra

By Eric Asimov

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For decades, as Lebanon has endured persistent strife and discord, the story of Lebanese wine has been the industry's ability to rise above the violence and dysfunction.

It's a remarkable tale of triumph over adversity, of courage and perseverance. Yet, while this framing is integral to the narrative of Lebanese wine, how is it expressed in the wines themselves, if at all?

Here at Wine School, we believe that good wines have stories to tell. But as with any good writing, wine appeals to multiple levels of perception. How deeply you choose to go is a personal decision.

On the most obvious level, wine is a beverage that people consume with enormous pleasure. It tastes good and feels delightful. That's one way to approach it.

You could simply sip the wine, noting its aromas and flavors, its texture, whether it goes well with what you are eating, whether you like it, whether you think it's a good value. These are important elements of evaluation, and are satisfying in their own right. You could stop right there if you liked.

But good wines have subtexts. They evoke emotions and inspire questions that reward exploration. It's our firm belief at Wine School that the more you know about a wine, the deeper and richer the experience of drinking it can be. But it also requires attention and interest, so it's a matter of choice.

In "[Wine and War](#)," a remarkable new documentary that examines the Lebanese wine industry over a conflict-ridden history stretching back more than 5,000 years to the [Canaanites](#), the writer [Elizabeth Gilbert](#) tells the story of a day she spent in that country with [Serge Hochar](#), the philosophical head of Chateau Musar, who guided the winery through 15 years of civil war and effectively put Lebanese wine on the map around the world.

According to Ms. Gilbert, Mr. Hochar, who [died in 2015](#), invited her to join him on his balcony one afternoon with a bottle of Musar '72, and told her that they were going to consume it over an afternoon and evening.

They would drink a little, she said, talk a little, watch the light change in the sky and the wine change in the glass. All along, she said, he told her not to judge the wine prematurely and not to reach conclusions, but to remain open to what it was making her feel and think.

"Just like people," she said he told her, "wine is something you cannot judge until you've seen it through every season of its being."

This sort of tantric wine drinking is not for everybody, nor is it generally practical. But it's an ideal, a hyperattentive way to observe the story of a wine unfold, develop and change, like a sunset or a baseball season.

You would not want to try this with just any bottle. [Mass-market wines](#) that have been processed to achieve certain predetermined taste profiles will not evolve in the glass. They are essentially inert, and will be just as uninteresting at the end of the bottle as they were at the beginning.

But a living wine, the sort that can change incrementally over years in the bottle as well as minutes in the glass, well, that is a wine worth considering in all its microscopic details.

We don't often get quite so granular in Wine School, but it's the reason we recommend drinking wines over the course of a meal with care and deliberation. This is especially so for the wines of Lebanon, which we have been studying over the last month.

We focused on reds. As usual, I recommended three bottles to drink. They were: [Massaya](#) Bekaa Valley Le Colombier 2018, [Chateau Musar](#) Bekaa Valley Musar Jeune 2018 and [Domaine des Tourelles](#) Bekaa Valley Cinsault Vieilles Vignes 2017.

Judging by the labels, the influence of France is clear. Lebanon was essentially a French colony from roughly the end of World War I to the end of World War II, and France has played a crucial role in the evolution of the modern Lebanese wine industry. French is the second language of Lebanon, after Arabic, and many Lebanese winemakers trained or worked in France.

The components of these wines also seem to be derived largely from France. The Tourelles is made entirely of cinsault, and the Musar Jeune of cinsault, syrah and cabernet sauvignon, all grapes common in southern France.

The Massaya is made of cinsault, along with grenache — also typically southern France though it originated in Spain as garnacha — and tempranillo, a Spanish grape that is also seen in southern France.

Yet these wines don't seem French at all.

The Massaya smells of sweet, dark fruit with touches of anise and sarsaparilla. It tastes just as it smells, the flavors dry and focused, and it goes down easily. For a \$15 bottle, this is a fine value. It's straightforward but enticing, soft and delicious.

Does it enhance any impressions to know that the Ghosn brothers, Sami and Ramzi, who, with partners from Bordeaux and the Rhône Valley, own Massaya, faced terrible challenges in 2006? Back then, Israel and Hezbollah, a group backed by Iran, fought through [the month of July](#), the conflict spilling over into the Bekaa Valley near the border with Syria, the main grape-growing region.

The Ghosns both appeared in the “Wine and War” film. Ramzi Ghosn recalled how, rather than leave the region during the fighting, he spent a month in his vineyard, ready should the need arise to protect it. He said in the film that the violent experience of war had changed the way he thought about winemaking.

“I want it now, rather than in 10 years,” he said of his wines.

Maybe the wine is more complex than I thought.

[Ramzi Ghosn](#) was kind enough to chime in to Wine School. “Lebanon will rise again because our heritage is anchored in this wine heritage of hard work, tolerance, generosity and perseverance,” he said.

Musar Jeune, a more immediately accessible bottle than Chateau Musar’s flagship wine, which requires aging, was also easy to drink now, though it had a classic dry austerity that the easygoing Massaya did not.

I felt the syrah component immediately, with savory, spicy olive notes in the aromas. On the richly flavored palate, the syrah harmonized with the fruitiness of the cinsault and the tannins and herbal flavors of the cabernet. Perhaps I’m too open to suggestion, but I couldn’t help sensing a flavor of [za’atar](#), a Middle Eastern blend of thyme, sumac and sesame seeds.

It’s virtually impossible for me to separate the experience of drinking any Musar wine from memories of Serge Hochar, who was the central figure in “Wine and War.”

“Your interpretation of a wine depends on your identity, on your soul, on your body,” he said in the movie. “This is how you learn to taste life, slowly.”

With the Lebanese market for wine largely destroyed by the civil war that broke out in 1975, Mr. Hochar traveled widely around the world, building a market for Musar while promoting the culture of Lebanon. Joe Saade, a Lebanese winemaker whose label, [Terre Joie](#), is not yet available in the United States, commented that he was inspired by Musar to go into wine.

“Its distinctiveness is what tells me that Lebanese wines should become an unmissable wine category,” [he said](#).

The Tourelles, made entirely of cinsault, stood out from the other two wines for its elegance and subtlety. Though a year older than the others, it was the least ready to drink, with fine but apparent tannins. Still, its aromas and flavors were complex and floral, with a touch of salinity. It was lovely with a dish of [chicken shawarma](#), and it will age well.

Tourelles is one of the oldest wineries in Lebanon, founded by a Frenchman in the 19th century, although run by the Issa family since 2003. The winemaker, [Faouzi Issa](#), studied and worked in France before returning to Lebanon.

“Although we are in the middle of a war zone, we are lucky people,” he said in the movie.

Readers were almost entirely enthusiastic about these wines. [Joseph](#) in the Île de France drank the Tourelles, finding that it offered a great first impression and concluding that it deserved contemplation.

[Rob D.](#) of New Jersey rightly pointed out that these were classic dry wines that demanded food. “I doubt that this wine would be a crowd pleaser at a cocktail party,” he said.

[VSB](#) in San Francisco drank a 2016 Hochar Père et Fils, another Musar wine, which he said was excellent with beef and lamb kofte and labneh, a good Lebanese meal. He consumed it while listening to New Zealand dream pop from [Mild Orange](#) in the background.

I’m happy to say that VSB seems to have inspired a trend among readers of trying to pair their wines not only with food but with music, too. Joseph reported pairing the Tourelles successfully with Tom Petty, while [Martin Schappeit](#) of Forest, Va., drank the Massaya and the Tourelles with “[Miserere](#)” by the English composer [Michael Nyman](#).

I believe Mr. Hochar would approve of following their muses.