

# History of Winemaking in Macedonia



Winemaking equipment brought from France upon establishing the winery

**W**ine has been produced in these lands since the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC and has remained a constant feature of agricultural and social life ever since. Despite this, the region has experienced its share of abrupt change. As we trace the history of winemaking from antiquity through the middle ages towards modernity, we can see that social, economic, political and cultural changes have impacted the wine industry in Macedonia in ways unlike those in any other country in the world.

Numerous archaeological artefacts pointing to the importance of wine making across Macedonia have been found. Most

of them turned up around the town of Kavadarci in the Tikveš Wine District. These bronze and ceramic objects are undoubtedly relics of the classical town of Stobi, the ruins of which are both impressive and accessible. This town was of strategic importance as a stopping point on the long road from the Danube River to the Aegean Sea.

Stobi is of course the most famous remnant of the classical world, its multiple excavations have regularly unearthed references to different civilisations including Neolithic foundations. As recently as 2009 a well preserved head of Augustus, founder of Rome, was discovered. It is the largest



site of its kind in Macedonia and as such is central to the branding of the new Stobi Winery in Gradsko.

There are other sites too. In the town of Valandovo near Gevgelija, ancient sites dating back to the seventh century BC have been discovered at Isar Marvinci and Idominae.

It is difficult to contemplate the effect that 500 years of Ottoman rule had on life in the Balkans. Every aspect of life and culture was in some way influenced. Whether through the cultivated, but relatively clandestine, strife for a national identity, or through the acquiescence to Turkish cultural customs during all these years, Macedonia's heritage and traditions were to a large extent influenced by the Ottomans.

Culturally, the Ottomans were not interested in wine. According to the teachings of the Koran, the consumption of alcohol is forbidden and consequently winemaking, perceived as an inherently Christian custom, effectively ceased. Although table grapes were grown, the empire was more interested in the cultivation of tobacco, a legacy that remains prominent today in Macedonia's strong tobacco industry.

Christians choosing to live by their own customs were forced to operate in the shadows. They still consumed alcohol but clever systems of staying under the radar were needed. *Rakija*, a form of flavoured brandy emerged as an

alternative to wine. Easy to make and store, *rakija* developed as the cultural beverage of the Slavic and Macedonian people throughout the Balkans, a tradition that is still a part of daily life in the region today.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Ottoman hegemony was waning. In 1885 in Kavadarci PanoVelkov, a merchant and nobleman, built what is now the oldest winery in the country, Tikves.

Ottoman domination completely ended in 1913, but in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, between 1908 and 1914, 30,000 hectares of vineyards in Macedonia were completely destroyed by the phylloxera pest. This period marked a decrease in viticulture in the country and with the turbulence of war, a major part of grapevine areas had disappeared by 1920. However, despite the difficult political and economic circumstances, viticulturists from the region gathered together and made an effort to renovate the grapevine by grafting home grapevine on American vines that were resistant to phylloxera.

In 1925 King Alexander Karadjordjevic and his wife Maria founded the Elenov Winery choosing Demir Kapija in Tikves as the site capable of rivalling the great aristocratic wines of Western Europe.

It is reputed that the King's experts chose Demir Kapija after burying lamb's heads at various locations throughout his Kingdom, from Macedonia to Slovenia, in order to ascertain which area would offer the best fertility. The slower the head decayed, the more suitable the site. Consequently Demir Kapija was chosen and Elenov became the one of the first wineries in the Balkans to own its own vineyards.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Macedonia became one of the six republics constituting the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. During this pursuit of creating a balanced and just society centralised economic planning realigned



One of the premises at the winery- once stables of lipizzaners, later used as wine cellar



**Villa Marija-the entrance to Queen Marija's villa**

the way viticulture, winemaking and its distribution would work. All elements of the industry were nationalised. Ownership of everything from the land, barrels, equipment to the wine passed to the state for the collective good. Thirteen wineries were created in the Republic of Macedonia, mainly for the production of bulk wine. At the same time there were more than 30 000 families that owned small vineyards and sold the grapes to the 13 large wineries.

The effects, like in all other countries experiencing this change in the cultural fabric, were extremely detrimental. Growers were paid for quantity and not quality of their grapes, and the sale was always guaranteed regardless of quality. In its turn the wine would always be made regardless of the quality of grapes, and the resulting product would always be distributed throughout the federation and beyond. There was a small allocation for the domestic consumption within the Macedonian republic. Crucially though, this was bulk wine. Socialism and its economic principles would dominate until 1990.

The collapse of communism and its consequences facilitated rapid change. It was the end of an era. Although Macedonia transitioned relatively peacefully to a parliamentary democracy, a decade of nationalist conflict in the former Yugoslavia contributed to instability in the region. Attempting to transition from a centrally planned economy to a free market was not without difficulty and

injustice. Models of western capitalism by their very nature created winners and losers, and the wine sector was no different. Restructuring large, vertically integrated wineries and casting them off under new private ownership into a globalised competitive world is not easy. After Macedonia signed its declaration of independence, the former state owned wineries were privatised and a number of small family owned wineries emerged all over the country. Growers became owners of the land they worked. Many of those whose dreams used to be to simply to sell the fruit started to produce their own wines. Growers were back in control of the brands' direction and destiny. They are still looking for new markets and new ways of communicating their messages.

However, the country's domestic market is relatively small and it is no wonder that Macedonian wineries have turned mainly towards exporting their wines in order to sustain their businesses. Today, almost 80% of the wine produced in the country is exported.

Despite all the challenges that the wineries in the country face on a daily basis, there are new markets to conquer, more medals to win, and more opportunities to promote Macedonian wines to be exploited. I am positive that these challenges will motivate our wine producers to use the wine potential of the country wisely, to invest in its growth and to let the people in the world know about the exquisite wines of this small sunny country.

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