



Macedonian Wine Culture

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September and October are the months when the grape producers are enjoying the result of their work. Every year the grape producers celebrate the completion of the whole cycle of grape growing, ripening and harvesting. Once the grapes are picked they will be used for making various products - wine, brandy, liqueurs, preserves, "madjun" (grape honey) and in a few houses you might even find the traditionally made "rejchel". The grapes are harvested usually in August and September, but the owners have to monitor the situation closely and decide when a particular grape variety should be picked, depending on the weather conditions and the sugar, acid and tannin content. A lot of the grape producers sell their grapes in bulk and if you are in the Tikvesh region around the harvest time you will see a lot of tractors lining up at the various collection points to sell their daily harvest. If it starts raining a day or two before the harvest the grapes will be fuller and heavier, but their sugar content will be low. That will definitely be a problem this year and due to the very rainy summer this agricultural sector will suffer big losses. Bad harvests like this one are crucial and existentially important to the boutique wineries. The big ones have higher likelihood

of surviving, but it is not easy for anyone in this business when nature is brutal as it has been in the last month.

Kavadarci and Negotino have Grape Harvest celebrations (*Grozdober*) sometime in mid-September. This year Kavadarci had its *Grozdober* between 5-7 September and it included wine carnival, children's carnival, bohemian evenings, some dancing and music. Negotino has something like a fair, very crowded and loud. All the locals attend. However, as much as it might be interesting for them, for people outside the Tikvesh region (or the country) it is not really a very interesting event. I have been hoping that over the years these festivals will become more culturally defining, with an educational programme, some good substance to the events. A lot of work has to be done in these small towns before they become a tourist attraction like the grape harvest festivals in Italy, Spain and other parts of the world. For a start they have to improve their information flow because it takes a lot of work to find out when and where the events are taking place. No information on the municipalities' websites, ad hoc media announcements and nothing in English. It's almost as if they try to keep it secret...and they are not. To start with, maybe next year on these festivals we will not see cheap random things being sold, from





notebooks to plastic slippers and clothes, but a farmers' market with local produce in relation to the grape harvest. That would already change the character of these festivals in Macedonia and make them a memorable experience for those who attend. It might also inspire the local population to offer their produce and start up a family business.

If you want to take part in the grape harvest you need to know a person who knows a person who has a vineyard...there is still nothing organized, or if there is, it is not well publicized. Also, if you want to buy some of the homemade artisan produce you will have to start discovering the Tikvesh region villages and meet some *babas* (grandmas) who will offer their specialties. I would highly recommend some of the grape preserves (*slatko*) as well as "rejchel" (pronounced like Rachael, which in Turkish means fruit preserve in general, but this is not just any preserve. It is a specialty of the Tikvesh region made out of grapes, pumpkin, eggplants and some other mysterious ingredients). None of these can be found in the commercial stores.

Then, we get to the main thing grapes are famous for - the WINE! We are very lucky with the few boutique wineries that have been opened in Macedonia in the last 15 years. The variety is increasing and the quality is becoming better. Macedonian wines nowadays have become a brand that is being recognized by wine lovers in Europe. Macedonia is very lucky to have a few enthusiasts who also research, write, taste and compare the Macedonian wine to everything else out there. Ivana Simjanovska and Paul Caputo are finalizing the *Wine*

Guide 2014, so hopefully we will be able to get the latest insights into the Macedonian wine world. Ivana was a co-author of the first edition and the founder of **vino.mk**, a platform for discussion, education and wine-related-news spreading. These endeavors are extremely important for Macedonian wine culture to become more than just a local, undiscovered and potentially valuable segment of this society. In almost every house you will see big tanks with fermenting grapes in September and October. People make their home wines and whatever is left is distilled into "rakija" (brandy). The rakija culture here has not got the same increase as it has in Serbia and Bosnia in the last decade. It is still enough if it is "domashna" (homemade), to assume that it is a good quality, which is occasionally the case. Rarely would you find connoisseurs who use good quality grapes, know in advance what they are aiming for and are able to consistently provide the same rakija. Unfortunately, you will also very rarely find other fruits distilled into rakija even though Macedonia produces the most delicious fruits in the region. A lot more work is needed, a lot more experiments have to be done and more experts have to be involved in the production of high quality produce like ice wine, fortified wines, desert wines, fruit wines, wine jelly, grape cosmetics etc. before we can say Macedonia is using its full potential and is properly positioned on the wine map of the world. Now the season is over, the grapes are fermenting. Until next year enjoy a good company with a glass of good wine or rakija. *Na zdravje!*