

In September, Mary Retallack, from Retallack Viticulture, visited Stuart Pettigrew and his family in Kosovo. Many readers would know Stuart from his time in Australia as a horticultural consultant, and his business Bug Central. Stuart is currently working in Pristina as an agribusiness advisor with Intercooperation as part of a horticultural project financed by the Swiss and Danish governments (www.intercoopkos.org).

A day in the Kosovo wine industry

By Mary Retallack¹

Kosovo is in the Balkans and is located within a one to two hour drive of Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia. The population is approximately two million people, with many Kosovars still living abroad as a result of the war, mostly in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Rahovec Valley

Together with members of Intercooperation, I toured through the wine region of Rahovec, which was once a revered wine production area in the former Yugoslavia, and is now the centre of fruit and vegetable production in Kosovo. It is located about 50 kilometres south-west of Pristina as the crow flies (or a 90-minute drive on rough roads). We visited both vineyards and wineries in the region. Kosovo is steadily rebuilding after the upheaval of the war with Serbia in 1999. It has a strong winemaking tradition and there were approximately 9000 hectares planted to vines prior to the war. Now, only 5000ha of vineyards remain. Much of the viticultural and winemaking expertise has also been lost since the war.

Varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Gamay, Chardonnay, Riesling, and local varieties such as Vranac, Prokupac (red varieties) and Smederevka (white variety) are commonly grown in Kosovo. Raki brandy is a popular drink, which is made from fermented and distilled grapes. Grape juice is also sold, mostly on the domestic market.

Like Australia, many Kosovo grapegrowers are unable to sell their grapes this season. Prices have declined from 0.25 per kilogram to 0.15/kg (or 150/tonne). The government has promised to pay 1000/ha to growers who cannot sell their crop, but with half of the payment delayed until 2011 under the agreement, it is questionable if this payment will be realised by the growers.

The Kosovo wine industry has been isolated from industry best practice for many years and, in many cases, lacks the



technical expertise and best suited varieties required to grow quality winegrapes. Growing conditions are conducive to growing sound winegrapes, with fertile soils and good access to water (quantity and quality).

Visiting vineyards

We visited several vineyards in the Rahovec wine region, which are on average 0.5-2ha in size. We asked many questions through an interpreter and received answers to our questions in broken English. The details below are a summary of these discussions, with as much accuracy as we were able to ascertain.

A small amount of rain had fallen just prior to our visit and the soils were very sticky (similar to the Biscay clay found in McLaren Vale vineyards). Without the input of gypsum, the vineyards are unable to be accessed easily, either by machinery or on foot.

Rainfall is sufficient to dry-grow the grapevines, with regular rainfall occurring during summer, which increases the humidity in the canopy. Temperatures

can get as low as -20°C during the winter months and greater than 40°C in summer.

Vines are planted predominantly onto Kober 5BB rootstock because of the prevalence of phylloxera. Trellis systems are rudimentary and consist of a single cordon with four permanent catch wires; vines are also bush trained. The vines are hand pruned in January or February and the vineyard is ploughed about seven times throughout the season.

The majority of vines are dry-grown and while there are good water reserves, there is little infrastructure available to selectively water vines.

One of the vineyards we visited was 0.3ha in size and the vines were cropped at 17t/ha, yielding about 5t in total. In the past, the grower received about 0.30/kg for his grapes, but this has fallen to 0.17/kg this year (this is about AUD\$240/t) for the grapes he is able to sell. Some of the grapes will be left on the vine.

About nine fungicide sprays are applied during the growing season, however, sulfur and/or DMI applications do not start until the shoots are about 50cm long. This may

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A view across Kosovo's Rahovec Valley.



Vranac grapes grown on a single-wire trellis with four permanent catch wires.

go some way to explain the high incidence of powdery mildew observed at harvest.

Some bunch thinning occurs as the bunch size of some varieties (including Vranac) can be large. Workers earn about 15/day (or about AUD\$21/day) for a 12-hour workday. During busy periods, the workers often sleep in the vineyard in makeshift shelters, as they work from dawn to dusk.

Vintage was in full swing during our visit; all vines are hand picked into small crates and placed on the back of small motorised wagons, or tractors pulling larger wagons. The main diseases appear to be powdery mildew and a range of bunch rots, which were prevalent during our visit (it appears no attempt is made to remove diseased bunches prior to arriving, or at the winery).

Stone Castle Vineyards

The largest wine producer in Kosovo is Stone Castle Vineyards (<http://www.stonecastlewine.com/en/>), which has about 500ha of producing vineyards. It reportedly has the capacity to store up to 50 million litres in stainless steel containers and five million litres in oak barrels.

Iliria Wines and Toka Food

Brothers Nursret and Ismet Haxhimurati produce wines at the Biopak Winery under the Iliria wine label. A range of varieties is produced including Vranac, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, Riesling, and Raki (wine brandy). Iliria is struggling to find a home for all its grapes and is looking at innovative ways to spread its risk and capitalise on the products that are grown within the region. This includes the production of table wine, Raki, grape juice and ajvar (pepper paste).

Grape juice

Instead of wasting the grapes that cannot be sold as wine, the grapes are either

distilled into Raki or made into grape juice. This is a relatively straightforward process, where the grapes are crushed and cooled to prevent fermentation; bentonite is added to clarify the juice (this takes 48 hours) and the juice is then racked off, pasteurised (88°C for 30 minutes) and bottled. The final product is sold in the domestic market at a premium.

Ajvar – pepper (red capsicum) paste

Peppers, along with a range of other fruit and vegetable crops, are grown extensively throughout the Rahovec Valley. The Haxhimurati brothers are producing a traditional Balkan pepper paste called ajvar, which is produced next to the winery. This project has been supported through Intercooperation and is one of the many success stories to have come out of the projects that Stuart has led while in Kosovo.

There are many parallels between the Kosovo and Australian wine industries. Progressive growers are finding alternative destinations for their grapes, diversifying their crops grown and retaining more control over the value chain (growing, processing and marketing) to minimise their risk.



The author pictured with Nursret (far left) and Ismet (far right) Haxhimurati, who are producing ajvar with the assistance of Stuart Pettigrew (second from left) from Intercooperation.



Local Kosovar grapegrowers.



Crushing grapes at Stone Castle Winery.



Chardonnay grapes that will be sold over the border in Albania.



Producing ajvar, a traditional Balkan pepper paste, which the Haxhimurati brothers are producing next to their winery.