

Romania rising as New World of wine in 'old' Europe

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Hand pickers harvest grapes at Lacerta winery in Dealu Mare, Bucharest. On the gentle slopes of the Big Hill (Dealu Mare) region, winemakers are striving to make Romania become the New World of wine in Europe.

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"The conditions to make wine here are world-class," says Walter Friedl, the Austrian co-owner of the Lacerta winery.

"We are here at 45 degrees of latitude and we have conditions like in Bordeaux or Tuscany," he adds, speaking from his vaulted cellar, where wine matures in oak barrels made in France, Hungary and Russia as well as Romania.

Outside, pickers are harvesting grapes on the picturesque hills.

Friedl and his Romanian business partner Mihai Banita run an 82-hectare (200-acre) estate in Romania's southern Dealu Mare region, about an hour's drive from Bucharest.

The winery has a state-of-the-art processing unit that uses gravity to process grapes and a terrace overlooking the hills to welcome oenophile tourists.

Forty percent of the eight million euros (\$10 million) invested in the estate was provided by European funds for development granted to Romania as a new EU member.

With the exceptional sunshine of eastern Europe and Mediterranean air masses coming from the south, Dealu Mare is seen by specialists as one of the most favourable areas for wine.

Some influential oenologists, such as Bordeaux-based Michel Rolland, predict the Black Sea region—countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Armenia—will be the next big thing in the world of fine wines.



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"We see a new world inside Europe. Romania, Bulgaria, they are... our Australia or our Chile," Friedl told AFP.

"In a way, you can say that Romania is the New World of the Old Wine World," says Bogdan Costachescu, oenologist for one of Romania's top quality winemakers, Davino, pointing to the growing success of the country's wines.

Romania grows international classics like Merlot, Cabernet-Sauvignon or Riesling, but also boasts unique local [grape varieties](#).

"We are not only making the umpteenth quality Merlot," explains Banita, of the Lacerta winery. "We have our own Feteasca Neagra"—a

red—"and its dried-prune aroma. (Also) Feteasca Alba or Tamaioasa," two white varieties.

"Some bottles are now selling for 60 euros and they deserve this price," says Cristian Preotu, the manager of Romania's Comtesse du Barry delicatessen stores.

But while Romania may look like a newcomer on the international wine map, the country is actually rediscovering a tradition dating back to antiquity and praised by the Latin poet Ovid.

That ancient wine-making tradition suffered a near-fatal blow during the Communist dictatorship that ruled the country from 1945 to 1989.

"The Communists collectivised the vineyards. They focused on quantity not on quality. Everything was poured into the same vat," Preotu explains.



Walter Friedl, who co-owns Lacerta winery. "We are here at 45 degrees of latitude and we have conditions like in Bordeaux or Tuscany," he said from his vaulted cellar, where wine matures in oak barrels made in France, Hungary and Russia as well as Romania.

After the fall of late dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, [winemakers](#) and oenologists started to strive for a renaissance.

A French earl and winemaker, Guy Tyrel de Poix, was one of the first to embrace the Romanian "terroir" and opened his Terra Romana winery in 1994.

"That was a turning point. He brought up a lot of savoir-faire," Banita says.

"When I decided to start making wine in the late 1990s, Romania was producing mainly white, sweet wine, in huge quantities, and cheap," recalls Dan Balaban, one of the co-founders of the Davino winery, also in Dealu Mare.

"I decided to do the opposite: produce mainly red, in small quantities, and to sell it for a higher price," he adds.



Mihai Banita, co-owner of Lacerta winery, prepares to taste a new wine in Dealu Mare. "We are not only making the umpteenth quality Merlot," he explains. "We have our own Feteasca Neagra"—a red—"and its dried-prune aroma. (Also) Feteasca Alba or Tamaioasa," two white varieties.

With France's prestigious Bordeaux estates as role models, Balaban is running a 68-hectare vineyard in the bucolic village of Ceptura.

He kept the estate's 40-year-old vines to produce the Davino label, which is sold only in delicatessens, top-end restaurants or to private customers. Recently, a French client bought 20,000 euros' worth of Davino wine in one go.

Despite their growing success, the owners of Davino and Lacerta complain Romanian wines have had trouble escaping their negative image.

"There should be a national campaign to help promote the quality of our wines abroad," says Balaban.

So far Romania, the sixth-biggest wine producer in the EU, is exporting only three percent of its wine output, far behind countries like France or Italy.

But with or without a public relations campaign, Bogdan Costachescu, the oenologist at Davino, says the estate will continue making wine with passion.

"[Wine](#) is like art, the essence of life. At every tasting, I feel like a painter before a private viewing, hoping the wines we make will touch the ones who drink them," Costachescu says.

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