

Despite strains, Turkey's wine industry refuses to wither

11 October 2017, by Fulya Ozerkan

On the verdant, fertile Gallipoli peninsula in northwest Turkey, headscarf-clad women in colourful clothes harvest grapes in the blistering late summer heat.

But they will never taste the flavours from the wine that will emerge from the grapes they pick.

"We eat the grapes but have never drunk wine, none of us drink wine," smiles Aynur, the head of the picking team.

Turkey is an overwhelmingly Muslim country and, with alcohol considered to be haram (prohibited) under Islam, many will not touch a drop throughout their lives.

Yet the country is blessed with an ideal climate for viticulture, with hot but humid weather and even a long winemaking tradition.

"The climate is very suitable, we have warm summers, we have humidity in the air, so the plants are very active and very happy," said Mark Sims, the Australian vineyard manager at Suvla, the main producer on the peninsula.

Suvla started up in Gallipoli in the 2000s, mainly with French grape varieties like Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

But most wine in Turkey is made from over a half dozen native grape varieties, such as Kalecik Karasi, Okuzgozu and Narince, though growers increasingly use European varieties, partly in a bid to find new markets.

Limited production

According to the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV), Turkey has the fifth largest area of vineyards under production in the world.

But most of the grapes are destined to be eaten as

fresh or dried fruit.

Turkey accounts for just 0.05 percent of world wine production and 0.06 percent of consumption, according to the California-based Wine Institute.

"The vast majority of grapes are used for other purposes, largely due to religious reasons," said Murat Yanki, a sommelier, who runs the Turkish wine tourism website, vinotolia.com.

As well as the Gallipoli peninsula, its main producers are concentrated on the Aegean coast, in central Anatolia and a small area in the southeast.

"It's correct to say there is an excellent quality due to an improvement in the vineyards and the treatments, especially in the last 10 years," said Yanki.

But, he noted, foreign interest was weak, with just two percent exported.

According to the economy ministry, Belgium is the biggest market abroad for Turkish wine, followed by breakaway northern Cyprus, recognised only by Turkey. Exports also go to Germany, Britain and the United States.

Taxes and regulations

But winemakers complain that high taxes and a tightening of regulations under the Islamic-rooted government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a pious Muslim, have hampered business.

In 2013, his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) pushed through parliament a controversial law on alcohol sales and drinking which also banned advertising.

The law halted alcohol sales between 10:00 pm and 6:00 am and prohibited them in the immediate

vicinity of schools and mosques.

Erdogan justified the measures on public health grounds, while the government argued the move was simply to regulate, not ban, consumption.

Restrictions on [alcohol sales](#) in Turkey are nothing new. The 17th century Ottoman Sultan Murad IV famously banned tobacco, coffee and alcohol—although he ironically died of alcoholism.

'Negative influence'

All forms of alcohol advertising are now outlawed in Turkey.

If an alcoholic brand is in shot during a TV report, it is blurred out. Producers have turned to social media to try to counter the ban.

It's also illegal to order any alcohol over the internet, although it remains available in supermarkets.

Yanki said that the ban on advertising wine and internet sales "have had a negative influence on the expansion of wine culture in the country".

An even greater obstacle for producers, however, may be a special consumption tax (OTV), in addition to 18-percent VAT on alcohol purchases in Turkey.

Alcohol has been a favourite AKP fiscal target since coming to power in 2002.

Rising prices have led to a sharp drop in wine consumption in recent years.

Some 62 million litres of wine was consumed in Turkey in 2014 and 63 million in 2015, but the figure fell to 51 million last year, according to the authority for the regulation of [alcohol](#) and tobacco (TAPDK).

'A different future'

Despite the problems, the picture is not all grim for producers.

"This is the way it is now, it will be different in future," Hikmet Ataman, a winemaker at Suvla, said. "What matters is the soil and climate that we already have."

Sims expressed optimism that Turkish wine was on its way to finding greater worldwide acclaim and said that some varieties were showing "huge potential in an international market".

Turkish wines have recently won gold medals in international competitions. Nevertheless, wine exports have remained largely flat over the last years.

"The current export quantity of the Turkish wine sector is not at the level it deserves, considering the volume of grape production," the economy ministry said in a recent survey of the sector.

For the workers in the field though, the taste of the [wine](#) will remain a mystery.

"Some hodjas (respected elders) say the money we earn is haram but we don't have any other income, we work for our bread and butter," said Aysel, also working in the vineyard.

"We never drink. We work. We put in our labour here," she said.

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