

# Turkey's happy hour

AT LONDON'S INAUGURAL WINES OF TURKEY JAMBOREE, KEVIN GOULD HEARS HOW THE COUNTRY'S WINEMAKERS ARE CULTIVATING A TASTE FOR THEIR DISTINCTIVE PRODUCTS

Great wines are born in the vineyard, receive their education in the winery and grow up in the cellar. Great wine industries take longer to mature. Until 10 years ago, the Turkish wine industry was dominated by two major producers, Doluca and Kavaklıdere, and by Tekel, the state monopoly. A revolution has taken place, freeing small winemakers from Tekel's one-handed grip, and Turkey now produces a pleasing range of mass- and hand-produced wines.

The next stage is to bring together producers small and large, to give them a voice in the international market. With their home wine market growing only slowly, Turks must export their wines if they are to prosper. So welcome, then, Wines of Turkey, a commercial organisation designed to get producers heard both in government circles and in export markets.

Its director is Taner Ögütoğlu, who produced the inaugural Wines of Turkey Conference and Tasting last month at Vinopolis on London's South Bank. On that cold, sunny morning, nearly 300 British and European wine importers, retailers, writers and experts sat under huge vaulted brick ceilings to hear the Turkish ambassador, Dr Ünal Çeviköz, open the conference by telling us: "Penicillin cures, but wine makes you happy, and happiness is the best cure." We applauded his sentiment and brevity, and were introduced to Dr Patrick McGovern, who runs the Biomolecular Archaeology Laboratory for Cuisine, Fermented Beverages and Health at the University of Pennsylvania.

Pat McGovern's presentation showed that Turkey is one of the places (together with Georgia and Northern Iran) where wine was first made, sometime between 8500 and 6000 BC. Glamorously bearded, Pat is the Indiana Jones of Wine, an archaeologist who travels to remote places in search of early winemaking civilisations. Indiana Pat showed us slides of the tomb near Gordian of either King Midas or his father, where amphorae were discovered bearing traces of tartaric acid, denoting wine. He also showed us Hittite drinking vessels, one inscribed "Eat, Drink and Be Merry", and a shot of the source of the Tigris, where the huge wild vines were the first to be domesticated by humans.

After Pat came Jancis Robinson, the best-read, best-respected and best-dressed wine writer we have. Jancis applauded the great strides forward taken by Turkish winemakers in the past decade, and noted with pleasure that a recent fashion for over-oaking seems to have passed. "Wines are great emissaries for Turkey," she said, praising the winemakers' ambition, and adding a hope (much echoed by the rest of the gathering) that international grape varieties such as Cabernet

Sauvignon, Merlot, Shiraz and Sauvignon Blanc might be blended with Turkey's indigenous grapes to create distinctive, delicious wines.

Dr Jose Villamouz is the world's leading grape geneticist. He has worked on vine genome mapping with Professor Gökhan Söylemezoğlu, head of the department of horticulture at Ankara University, and together at Vinopolis they showed us how DNA typing proves that the upper reaches of the Tigris were where wild (male and female) vines were first cross-bred to become hermaphrodites, the precursors of the world's wine-producing grapes. "There is no question," Dr Jose said, "that Turkey was a cradle of wine, and of language, too. His linguistic family tree showed us how Hittite is the mother and father of all Indo-European languages.

Professor Gökhan then let us get our tongues around a blind tasting of five wines made from indigenous varieties. Emir (white) was fresh, lively, with good minerality; Narince (white) had elegant structure and a pretty nose; of the reds, Kalecik Karası was tart and fresh; Öküzgözü showed itself as serious and powerful, with a balanced finish; Boğazkere was bold and tannic, with tremendous potential for blending.

After lunch there were excellent masterclasses by Charles Metcalf and Tim Atkin MW, and a Grand Tasting of wines by Kavaklıdere, Doluca, Kayra, Likya, Pamukkale, Selendi, Sevilen and Vinkara.

The conference and tasting were impeccably run by the events and PR specialist Redmint, and succeeded in getting Turkish wine to be taken seriously by the most serious people in the trade.

But what next? The impression gained by talking to the gathered experts is that Turkish wines are ready to become important, respected players in international wine markets. Turkey's wealth is in its native grape varieties, some of which demonstrate extraordinary potential for blending with international varieties. The dynamism and ability of Turkish winemakers to procure expert consultants and investment so as to further professionalise the industry will be key, as will their appetite to band together under an umbrella organisation such as Wines of Turkey.

Turkey's tourism successes mean that the market for its wines is ripening, and the country's economic successes have created a thirst among intelligent producers to improve and become world class. Having spent long years in the shade, Turkish wine's time in the sun is near. ♦

For future Wines of Turkey events, see [www.winesofturkey.org](http://www.winesofturkey.org)

Kevin Gould is author of *Dishy* (Hodder) and *Loving and Looking with Reckless Abandon* (Quadrille), both available from [cornucopia.net/books.html](http://cornucopia.net/books.html)



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