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A man shows wine grapes



From factories to chateaux: Russia bids for wine fame

3 hours ago

GAI-KADZOR, Russia (AFP) — Bordeaux, Chianti... Kuban? For Andrei Piltakian, a small-time wine grower in the foothills of the Caucasus mountains, there is no doubt: Russia can compete with world-class wine regions.

"It's going to be better here than in France or in Italy. All we need is investment," said Piltakian, 33, as grape-pickers toiled on his 11 hectares (27 acres) outside the village of Gai-Kadzor in the southern region of Krasnodar.

Piltakian's vines, formerly part of a massive state wine farm, are in bad shape -- meagre and overgrown with weeds -- and the crop is mainly sold off to local Soviet-era "wine factories."

But investment is finally beginning to come to the rolling hills of Russian wine country, named after the local Kuban river and centred around the resort of Anapa on the Black Sea coast.

All around Anapa, a former colony of ancient Greece, hundred of hectares are being planted with new vines, and investors from Moscow, including banking, energy and metals tycoons, are pouring money into the region.

Even so, local wine entrepreneurs complain that quality was sacrificed for quantity during the decades of Soviet rule and that Kuban wines still have an image problem on the international market.

"It'll take 20 years... For the moment it's mainly mass-production wine around here," said local French wine entrepreneur Frank Duseigneur, director of Chateau Le Grand Vostok, a winery set up in 2003.

Duseigneur, who learnt his trade in France's Rhone River valley, was hired by a group of Russian private investors and moved to the small Cossack village of Sadovy in the Kuban in 2003.

The French wine expert also complained about the resistance to change among many local winemakers used to Soviet methods. "They just have to stop saying we're better, we're Russian," he said.

Chateau Le Grand Vostok is the new brand name for a former Soviet wine farm called Aurora. The winemaker produces some 600,000 bottles a year that sell in Russia for an average of 6.5 dollars (4.6 euros) each.

Other entrepreneurs in the region argue that the quality is just fine but that the wine needs better publicity -- both among the growing number of wine lovers in Russia and in potential markets abroad.

Some of the local wines have indeed come a long way since Soviet times, when Russian wine was notorious for being watered-down and often sickly sweet, industry experts say.

Winemaking in the region actually dates back thousands of years to the times of the Circassian and Adygey tribes and later settlers known as the Pontic Greeks, who came from ancient Greece.

After Russia's conquest of the Caucasus in the 19th century, many of the native inhabitants were expelled and these fertile lands were re-settled, mainly by Cossacks and ethnic Armenians.

In Soviet times, the industry was developed under the slogan "Let's Turn The Kuban Into The Soviet Champagne." But the anti-alcohol campaign of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s forced many vineyards out of business.

Another estate in the region that is aspiring to world-class standards is Abrau-Durso, a sparkling wine maker set in a lush valley near Anapa that was set up under Tsar Alexander II in 1870.

"There are some people who come here and put on airs about foreign wines being better. But then they always come back," said Yelena Petrova, a guide at Abrau-Durso as she showed an AFP reporter round extensive 19th-century cellars.

The estate is 70 percent state-owned and since 2005 has been providing sparkling wine for the Kremlin as it did for Russia's Tsars. Visitors can see a bottle autographed by President Vladimir Putin in the cellar.

"We want to bring back the popularity and the quality that our champagne had before the Revolution" of 1917, said Boris Titov, the Moscow-based chairman of Abrau-Durso and head of a leading Russian business group.

Abrau-Durso produces 2.5 million bottles a year of its classic sparkling wine.

For many local inhabitants of the Kuban, however, wine is not really about commercial production or creating fancy drinks. It's what they make at home using grape from the vines that grow in their courtyards.

"Everyone's a wine expert around here. Any old man can open a barrel and tell you everything about it," said Samvel Atlanian, 32, an ethnic Armenian who used to work on the state wine farm at Gai-Kadzor.

Atlanian, who makes around 50 litres (quarts) of wine a year from the vine in the courtyard of his home, said: "There isn't that thing about the year, the taste -- it just has to be good. You have to drink and enjoy!"