

From Russia with corks

TASTING ARTICLES RUSSIA

A clutch of Russian wines turned out to be rather impressive.

A Belgian wine importer contacted me to suggest I tasted some Russian wines he is currently importing into Europe. Dimitri Bonte's company Start2taste is based in Waregem. Last November he imported into Europe what he claims is the first container of wines from the Krasnodar region on the Black Sea to the east of Crimea (see [this map](#)). This was the region I visited back in 2009 and I seem to remember some muttering about incomers. (See, for instance, [Russian wine gets real.](#))

According to Bonte, the wines have been going down well in Belgium and are evidence of a new generation of wine producers in this, the most vine-friendly corner of Russia.

I put on my most sceptical armour before tasting this case of a dozen samples from two producers, Burnier and Lefkadia, but I must say I was most agreeably surprised, as you will see from the tasting notes below. And not only did the wines taste good, some of them, particularly those from Lefkadia, also looked particularly good. Some of the reds are above right, some whites, with the perfect wine glass plus condensation, below.



Lefkadia was established in the village of Moldavanskoe in 2006 by Mikhail I Nikolaev, who visited the region two years earlier and thought it looked just like Tuscany. Many tests and analyses of the local clay, limestone and sand later he planted vines and built a winery. He claims his technique of chilling grapes to between 4 and 8 °C before pressing and gravity-flow winery are unique in Russia. He has all sorts of toys such as a sorting table and concrete eggs. He initially planted all the usual international varieties but supplemented them in 2015 with more local ones,

twenty-first-century style. (I won't of course describe Saperavi, Mtsvane and Rkatsiteli as indigenous for fear of reprisals from Georgia.) Ex Mouton chef de cave Patrick Léon, who died very recently, was a consultant. Frenchman Gilles Rei is also cited on the smart literature, which, if I have understood correctly, boasts of 213 ha (526 acres) of vines.

I was also impressed by Domaine Burnier, founded in 2001 by Renaud Burnier who studied winemaking at [Changins](#) in his native Switzerland. One of his lecturers mentioned the potential of the Russian Black Sea coast so he and his wife Marina decided to take a holiday there in 1998. Their three-year search for Krasnodar's ideal spot for viticulture led them to plant a 50 ha site near the village of Natuchajevskaya between Anapa and Novorossiysk. They grow 10 different varieties and are making a speciality of local grape Krasnostop Zolotovskiy, also grown by Lefkadia. (And yes, it is in our beloved tome [Wine Grapes](#).)

Whites

Burnier Chardonnay 2014 Kuban

Pale gold. Very convincingly varietal nose. Super-clean and fresh. Possibly some oak for structure but absolutely none evident in the flavour. Sprightly saline pear-juice character. Very refreshing with excellent balance. Quite delicate.

Drink 2017 – 2021

16.5

Burnier, Lublu 2014 Kuban

Blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc and Muscat grown on higher elevation stony marl.

Deep honey straw colour. Not unlike a relatively rich Friuli blend on the nose. Broad, convincing, almost gingery, well-integrated blend on the palate. Salty hint. Pretty good. A wine with real character that could be enjoyed with or without food. Still surprisingly youthful. Quite long and spicy.

Drink 2017 – 2020

16.5

Lefkadia Riesling 2016 Kuban

The type on the back label is too small to read so I can't tell which Riesling this is, but Lefkadia is sufficiently cosmopolitan for me to assume this is German Riesling. Very light nose, but the palate tastes like a rather evolved German Riesling. Just off dry. Perhaps this is a little too warm for a Riesling with real nerve? There is good, fine, firm finish but there is not much nose and acid seems very slightly too low. But a good try! 40,000 bottles made.

Drink 2018 – 2020

15.5

Lefkadia Chardonnay 2017 Kuban

Very varied soils. Some lightly spicy oak makes a bit of an appearance on the nose. Salty finish and admirable fruit-acid balance but that saltiness seems just a little too much...? But there is good grip on the finish. Firm lime notes. Perhaps could do with just a tad more fruit on the mid palate. 38,000 bottles made.

Drink 2018 – 2020

16

Lefkadia, The Bachelor Collection Viognier 2017 Kuban

Unnecessarily heavy bottle. Wax capsule. Pretty light Viognier nose. Viognier is probably more of a novelty in Russia than for me. Pretty light and fresh. I suspect the grapes should have been allowed to ripen a bit further to develop more flavour. Light, crisp, refreshing, nicely textured and balanced white wine but not Viognier as I know it.

Drink 2018 – 2020

15.5

Reds

Burnier Merlot 2014 Kuban

Only medium depth of ruby with quite an evolved-looking rim. Light, fresh nose. Attractively sweet, brisk start and then counterbalanced by a fair amount of acidity. Clean with a not-excessive suggestion of cocoa powder. Certainly not concentrated but sufficiently ripe and well balanced. Light tannins on the end.

Drink 2017 – 2021

16

Burnier Cabernet Franc 2013 Kuban

Pale ruby. With evolved rim – as with the Merlot 2014. Light, almost inconsequential nose. Clean, fresh, Cabernet Franc fruit even if without that much of its characteristic aroma. Proper beginning, middle and end even if in a light register. Some sweetness. Tannins are so light that you could almost drink this, coolish, without food. Suitably different from the Merlot 2014, even if there's the tiniest hint of rusty nails on the reasonably persistent finish.

Drink 2016 – 2020

16

Burnier Krasnostop Zolotovskiy 2010 Kuban

The label cites only 'Krasnostop' as the name of this ancient, tannic Russian variety. The wine was aged for 18 months in French oak barrels.

Much darker than the same producer's younger Bordeaux red varieties. Mid garnet. Some evolution evident at the rim. Sweet, intensely fruity and rather floral nose. There's something a bit wild, even slightly but not unpleasantly sour, about this, but it has admirable structure. This is very well made! And is highly distinctive. The tannins have presumably receded by now (though they are still perceptible) but the fruit, fortunately, hasn't. This is clearly a very interesting grape variety. And this is a great example of it that is now highly enjoyable.

Drink 2017 – 2022

16.5

Burnier Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 Kuban

Deep blackish ruby for an 11-year-old wine. Smells as though the grapes weren't absolutely ripe when picked. In a way this is the least distinctive of these four reds from Burnier as it is recognisably Cabernet and fades just a little on the finish, though there is some sweet cassis character – but a little scrawny on the end. It may well have given more pleasure when younger.

Drink 2014 – 2020

15.5

Lefkadia Cabernet Franc 2016 Kuban

Unnecessarily heavy bottle with an attractive modern painting on the label. Looks very sophisticated. Mid crimson. Rather sweeter than the purest Cabernet Franc, but clean and fresh enough. Sweet palate entry and some methoxypyrazine leafiness on the palate. Slightly astringent finish. The structure slightly overwhelms the fruit, but you can't fault the ambitious presentation. Useful map and lots of text in Russian on the back label.

Drink 2018 – 2020

15.5

Lefkadia, Reserve Cabernet Franc 2013 Kuban

29% Merlot, 29% Syrah, 27% Cabernet Franc, 15% Petit Verdot.

Ridiculously heavy bottle. Smart black label with stylish orange dot pattern. 150,000 bottles made, apparently, far more than of their single Bordeaux varietals. Deep crimson. Very intense nose. Mouth-filling and confident. Lots of ripe fruit initially followed by a spicy, dusty finish. Vigorous and still youthful. Very creditable.

Drink 2018 – 2024

16.5

Lefkadia, The Bachelor Collection Cabernet Franc 2013 Kuban

Mid garnet. Nicely integrated ripe Cabernet with some maturity. Sweet start and very fresh. Great balance. A real education for anyone prejudiced against Russian wine! Nice beginning, middle and end top this completely satisfying wine. Not sure I can see the Cabernet Franc-ness but it's just a great drink. Tannins well melded.

Drink 2016 – 2022