

Ep 43 Bulgarian wines

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SPEAKERS

Janina Doyle



Janina Doyle 00:07

Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving wonderful world of wine. And wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you.



J

Janina Doyle 00:31

Hey, everybody, how are you? I hope you're drinking something delicious. Now today I am going to take you somewhere slightly off piste. And we are on a day trip to Bulgaria. Now, question. Have you ever drunk any Bulgarian wines? Certainly for me in the wine industry, I can count them on one hand. Well, until yesterday, yesterday, I attended a zoom tasting hosted by top Bulgarian sommelier, Zareh Masrobyan, and this tasting was named 'Funky Bulgaria' because simply the wines were really interesting, different and all indigenous varieties. I was incredibly impressed. So up until this point, the few Bulgarian wines I had tried had been incredible value. So I was super excited to try these. I was not disappointed. So I've decided I'm going to dedicate a whole episode just to these wines. Although keep in mind, by the time I actually release this episode, it's going to be month after the zoom tasting. So all the buzz will have died down. Well, hopefully, I shall spark it all back up again. Now, remember, go to my show notes, you can download a transcript and certainly with the spelling of these indigenous grape varieties, I think that will be very useful. So go and check that out. So first of all, I'm going to start by telling you what Zareh, the Bulgarian Sommelier told me about the history and the geography of Bulgarian wines. Let's see if I do I'm proud.

J

Janina Doyle 02:08

Now, for me, there is certainly one very interesting fact about Bulgaria's wine history. And that is in the 1980s when they were officially the fourth largest wine producer in the world. Now Jancis Robinson has been coined as saying, that Bulgaria managed a minor economic miracle in the 1970s and the 1980s. So how did that happen? So this was during the Soviet period, and the government basically set up a large state owned monopoly and it became a massive focus and a priority to produce wine. Rather than focusing on the indigenous varieties that they had, they planted Merlot, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Cabernet

Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, the well known, international grape varieties, and they were able to export to the Soviet Union these pretty basic but fruity easy drinking wines. So if you grew up in Russia, in the 1980s, certainly you would have tasted a lot of Bulgarian wines. Now, it wasn't just Russia. The UK got really behind some of the wines, especially this very full bodied, intense Cabernet Sauvignon. Now at the time, they were really making an impact because these wines were varietally labelled so this was something that in Europe, it wasn't common, making the wines a lot easier to sell. Now apparently at its peak in Sainsbury's, one of our top supermarkets in the UK, Bulgarian Cabernet Sauvignon was the biggest selling wine in the country, which is pretty crazy to think. But way before that Bulgaria's wine industry has another claim to fame in the UK, and that is with Winston Churchill. So Winston Churchill was our Prime Minister twice in fact, from 1940 to 1945, and then from 1951 to 1955. And he is famously known for being a huge fan of Pol Roger Champagne, to the point that Pol Roger's prestige cuvee that's only made in their top vintage years is called Sir Winston Churchill. Now he famous for this, but what Bulgaria can claim is that one of Winston Churchill's favourite red grape varieties was Broad-Leaved Melnik. Yes, that's correct. That's the name of the grape variety, Broad-Leaved Melnik, and he would receive annual shipments of this grape variety, so don't worry, we are going to taste one of them in a little bit. So stay put. However, to cut a long story short, with an anti-alcohol campaign in the late 1980s, which was quite similar to the prohibition times in America, followed by the fall of communism, which resulted in privatising the lands and giving them back to owners which had complications with many wine growers, not actually knowing how to make the wine and these winemakers not being around, so the wine growers were producing grapes of very poor quality, or picking them too quickly. They didn't have the knowledge. So there were many complications. However, getting into 2007 they joined the EU and that allowed them to have opportunities for far more support, more equipment, and to focus more on terroir, blending of wines, the soils, so in 2007, that is when two protected geographical indications were created. So PGI's, and that makes things quite simple when it comes to Bulgarian wines. There's literally two wine areas. So if you look at a wine map of Bulgaria, you will see to the north you have the Danube plane, then you have separating the Danube Plain, you have the Balkan mountain range. And underneath that you have the Thracian Valley. If you speak to wine makers, or you look on the bottles, they have individually separated both of these two PGI's into far more different wine regions. And I'm going to touch on that a little bit more as I drink the wines. I think let's pour the first from this zoom tasting and actually my favourite.



Janina Doyle 06:12

Oh, I do you love a bit of sparkling wine. Now, this is a Pet Nat, a Pétillant-naturel, so this is the most natural way to make a sparkling wine. If you don't know what a Pet Nat is, I

advise you go back to one of my previous episodes. That's Episode 25, which is on organics, biodynamics and sustainable wines. I actually do a tasting on another Pet Nat and I talk about exactly how it's made. Now this little beauty is made from Mavrud. So Mavrud is an indigenous variety of Bulgaria and is probably considered their signature variety. Now just to throw you off, interestingly, there are arguments it could be Mavrud or maybe it's Rubin so if you've not heard of either of these two grape varieties, do go and check them out. Rubin, interestingly enough is a crossing between Syrah and Nebbiolo. So, a french grape variety within an Italian - definitely worth checking out. Now, Mavrud is a very thick skinned, red grape variety and it can produce a big bold red with big tannins. So you can imagine how very interesting, that this is being made into a sparkling wine. So very, very careful pressing to make sure those skins and those tannins don't come out in the wine. Right, let's get some in the glass. Interestingly enough, before I tell you about tasting the colour is this gorgeous kind of medium golden colour with a slight amber tint, it's very interesting. This is not overly aromatic but has this gorgeous mix of like brioche with cranberries and a nice bit of quince in there. A little bit of ginger. A little bit yeasty. Again that brioche coming through on the palate. It's kind of medium bodied really, really soft. That nice little fizz. This kind of note of like a peach pie, like a pie crust. So like peach pie with almost like a hint of orange skins on the edge. So it gives you that slight more bitter, savoury note, but it's actually very soft and very pretty. It's so easy drinking, this is really perfect as an apéritif, on its own. It doesn't need any food necessarily. This would be an absolute ultimate wine to bring to a dinner party to really surprise people and for something to talk about. Now this is £14.95 from The Old Cellar. All these wines came from The Old Cellar. I assume this is something that they set up for the zoom tasting. So I apologise for anyone who's not in the UK. But I implore you to go and investigate where the hell you can get your Bulgarian wine from, wherever you are in the world. UK drinkers, very, very simple. Just go to The Old Cellar.



Janina Doyle 09:08

So let's just look at the producer just for a second. So this is Georgiev/Milkov. So it's two winemakers who've come together in 2014. So a young project. It's Petar Georgiev and Radostin Milkov and they've spent ages travelling all over the world to America, New Zealand and Austria, even China, amongst others, learning their craft, they've come back and it's about fresh ideas, new ideas, and certainly a little bit funkier ideas. Now they don't own any land but they've gone around Bulgaria to find the best grapes. This specific Pet Nat is called, quite like the name, Pet Nat Funky Mavrud. Now I love that it says the great variety Mavrud on the front label that makes things easy for us. Truthfully as well for my tasting notes. Hopefully you've realised that as a Pet Nat and as natural kind of sparkling wine goes this isn't too funky. I think they is very approachable and super likeable by anybody who tries it. Now these two guys are doing really good things for the Mavrud

variety and Rubin, as I told you. So those two main grape varieties, and both of these grape varieties, you're going to find them in the PGI: the Thracian Valley as opposed to the northern Valley, which is called the Danube Plain. That is where you're going to find these two varieties. Now, the birthplace of Mavrud is Asenovgrad. And this is very close to the second largest city in Bulgaria, and it's called Plovdiv, and this is supposed to be a beautiful place to visit. Plus, within half an hour, you can get yourself into the vineyards, of which there aren't many. So the grape variety that is used in this Pet Nat is from here, and I told you about in the Thracian Valley, although that's the official PGI, they have created these little sub regions. This is what they would call the Western Thracian Valley pretty easy in a way to remember.



Janina Doyle 11:01

So now, I want you to prepare yourself because the next grape variety I'm going to talk about is even more complex. So take a seat, ready. So this white grape variety is called Kaylashki Misket. So that's two words. Kaylashki is the first and the second is Misket. Now, I don't know about you, but I actually quite like saying it... Kaylashki Misket, sounds fabulous. Now, this is an amazing, grape variety that is super aromatic, does not belong to the Muscat family, but actually has that really kind of grapey aroma. I think if Viognier and Torrontes had a love child, but it had a hell of a lot more acidity. That is what Kaylashki Misket is. The history of this grape variety is it's a crossing between Muscat of Hamburg, which if you've ever heard of this grape variety was a crossing from Muscat of Alexandria and Trollinger. So these are slightly more known varieties. That Muscat of Hamburg was crossed with a hybrid called Vilar Blanc. So it's come together and created something quite unusual. So let me pull you some of this and I'll describe what I can smell and taste.



Janina Doyle 12:21

Okay, so it reminds me of Christmas. I don't know about how many of you in the world have satsumas on Christmas Day. Santa love satsumas. I don't know. Anyway, it's like beautiful orange freshness. And then there's a little green note at the same time like nettles was very Meadow like very, very fresh, but really jumps out up my nose. It's really quite unique. There's almost like this slight tropical nature like banana, maybe banana skins, orange skins, it's it's got all that real sharp intensity. All that is coming through on the palate. But now I'm getting much more of the, the grapiness and also this real hit of violets, it's very floral, it's very lifted. This is gorgeous and zippy and really in your face. This is not like really any other grape variety I've ever tried. And it really is one to be remembered. Perfect with shellfish. Perfect with any fresh light fish because of that citrus notes, the really sharp citrus notes and also because of that really lifted acidity. I think the

perfect pairing would be a cerviche and specifically if you had a ceviche with some fresh oranges and some red onions, oh my god, that would be a match made in heaven. So this is incredible. And it is £12.60. That is insane. I personally I think if I was going to guess this wine if somebody told me it was £16, £17, £18, I'd be totally happy with it.



Janina Doyle 14:04

So let's talk about the producer. This is Haralambievi family vineyards and winery, and they are located in a region called Pleven, which is in the northern PGI, the Danube Plain. Now this specific wine that I'm drinking is the H's series. So H Apostrophe S. And that's basically their series of wines that are all dedicated to just the indigenous varieties. Now a story behind this winery is actually rather cute. They have this motto that love turns into wine and wine into love. And the story is that it was Mitko who in 2009 after dreaming about doing this for such a long time, he bought 9 hectares in Pleven with the idea that this should be an important wine centre. And during that time he then met Tsveti, his then future wife, and they fell in love. And she wanted to do more vineyards and they bought more hectares of land. And in the meantime, they've had three children. And it's this very tiny little family making very impressive wines. Now to touch on the fact that there are some sub regions again, there are three sub regions in this Danube Plain. Now Pleven, where this winery is, is in the middle section, the main section, and that very simply is called the Danubian Plain. So quite easy. And for anyone who's interested in the other two, because I'm not tasting any more wines from these regions, on the left, you have Northwest Bulgaria. Yep, fine, I'm quite happy with these sub regions, they seem to make sense. And then to the East on the coast, or where the Black Sea is, it's called the North Black Sea. So that is easy to understand. And now also to keep the soil types super easy. In general, in the Danube Plain, in the north, you're going to find Limestone and Loess soils, whereas in the Thracian lowlands, you're going to find more Clay and Sand soils. Now on a side note, if you do want your international varieties like Merlot does very well in Bulgaria. Merlot also loves clay. That's also why it does very well in Bordeaux on the right bank so. You're gonna find a lot of the Merlot down in the Thracian lowlands.



Janina Doyle 16:14

Okay, new grape variety alert, I repeat new grape variety alert, we are on to the third wine. This is a white grape variety called Keratsuda. Now, typically, it makes quite simple, basic wines, it doesn't have that much acidity. But winemakers are really learning how to work with it. And for example, this wine is an orange wine. So we're going to talk about that in a second. Now, one point, this was down to about 10 hectares only in the whole of Bulgaria. So now it's having a little bit more of a comeback. Now you're going to find this grape variety in its home, which is the Struma River Valley. Now that is one of the sub

regions. This sub region is part of the Thracian Lowlands, but it's completely separate from everything else. So again, do look at a map of Bulgarian wines. This is completely on the left hand side to the most western region of them all in the south, and it borders Macedonia. Now I'll let you into a bit of a secret. I'm not actually a fan of orange wine, for anyone who's interested, orange wine comes from white wine that has basically been left on the skins for a decent amount of time. So basically treated like it's a red wine. So it spends time macerating on its skins, those skins give a bit more of an orange colour to the wine, and also a little bit more tannins. You can get some really interesting flavours with orange wine, but for me, I always find them a little bit too bitter. But that is my preference and tasting this wine, I was still impressed with how it was made. And even better that it costs £12.95. Are you seeing the theme here with the pricings of these wines from Bulgaria, they are fantastic. So let's try this orange wine.



Janina Doyle 18:09

Okay, so the nose is slightly muted. And the reason for that very stupidly, I just took this straight out of the fridge before starting to record this. Now, this isn't orange wine, it should be treated a hell of a lot more like a red wine and so it should take time to be left in a glass open up and also to warm up. So yes do put it in the fridge. It's better to be served chilled, but not too cold. Now you get this kind of peachiness and maybe a bit of orange blossom and I get this lovely smell of kind of older barrels, like just a nice old wood. It's certainly inviting. It's very medium body. It has all these kind of apricot skins and it has those big tannins. They're quite grippy but their furry, they're textural. And actually the acidity's medium. It's refreshing enough and you have this like white flowers on the finish. It's a really interesting wine. It's very modern, it's very cool. And this is a sort of wine that you would want with food because of that interesting texture. So having this with chicken, with duck, these kind of dishes. In fact, I reckon this would go beautifully with like a chicken satay dish so those slight peanuts and a bit of sweetness that might really balance with the texture and a slightly more dry side of this wine. A truly think it's a really well made wine and actually the length on it is beautiful. It has 45 days macerating with the skins and there's a real just freshness and a cleanness, the whole way through.



Janina Doyle 19:49

Okay, so the producers are Libera Estate. These guys are also pretty new starting in 2013. And their focus is really showing the local age old traditions of the region but with this much more contemporary, modern feel to things. Now their main great variety that they actually champion is the indigenous varieties from this specific area. So remember we're in the Struma River valley and the main indigenous variety there is the Broad-Leafed Melnik. So do you remember I mentioned about the Broad-Leafed Melnik at the

beginning. Good old Winston Churchill's favourite red. Yes, well, that is actually the grape variety they are championing for this region. And so that now leads me to the last grape variety, which is, I've ruined it now. The Broad-Leaved Melnik. So this is a red variety. And it is really interesting. It's very Pinot Noir-esque, but it has a bit of an Italian vibe to it. It's not too intense. It's not too full bodied. And apparently, it's getting better and better every year. Now the reason it's called Broad-Leaved Melnik is because the leaves are so broad. So if you see the bunch of grapes on the vine, and you put it against one of the leaves, that leaves are huge In comparison, so that is partly why it got its name. Right. I think it's wine time. I know you're you're desperate. How is this one specifically tasting right? Thank you for the enthusiasm. Okay, right. Let's see how it tastes.

J

Janina Doyle 21:27

That was, Oh, well, that was quite a big glass for me. That's because I quite like this one, right. Okay, serious, serious. And I think it's really pretty on the nose. Lots of red cherries, red plums. You get this kind of crushed leaves and forest floor. That's that kind of Italian vibe I was mentioning that kind of comes through. Kind of Nebbiolo-esque mixed with Pinot Noir. So there you go. Your love child: Pinot Noir and Nebbiolo together. It's got this kind of sweet balsamic vinegar side to it as well giving that extra oomph. And actually a slight maybe a slight twigginess to it but in a good way. Really fruity. Really approachable. This is medium bodied, it's fresh, it's vibrant with a decent amount of tannins, to be honest, they're kind of like a slightly dusty, chalky kind of tannins. But good, nice and ripe. A slight, a slight earthy finish, but also some kind of even like rose petals or something a little bit floral. Fantastic. So let's look at the producer.

J

Janina Doyle 22:32

This is Damyanov family winery and vineyards. And this specific wine is called Vineyard but it's actually spoke V N Y R D. And it's actually very nice because the D part at the end is for Damyanov and then the V N Y and R all stand for the initials of the four family members behind this wine. So it's actually quite a nice little story. Now only 2000 bottles of this wine are made and price point everyone, very important. £12.75. Like literally I'm shocked every single time I hear the prices. But that's now what I expect from Bulgaria. Now of all the wineries that I just mentioned, this one has been around since the Second World War. So nice to have a veteran in the mix.

J

Janina Doyle 23:18

So now I've done a tasting of four indigenous varieties. You also know about the fifth one, Ruben because that's also potentially the signature grape variety of Bulgaria. And there

are more indigenous varieties. I'm going to mention one grape variety, extra, added bonus moment, which is the Gamza grape variety. And I mention this because this is actually the same grape variety as Kadarka in Hungary. They just call it Gamza. So that one is hopefully an added bonus that maybe you already knew. Now let's just finish off with summarising the country as a whole so you feel a little bit more confident about Bulgarian wine in general.



Janina Doyle 24:06

So, Bulgaria tends to have about 3000 hours of sunshine, especially in the Thracian Valley, slightly less just in the Danube Plain, but this is exactly what you would expect in the south of France or in northern Italy. In terms of plantings. There's about 60,000 hectares of vineyards planted, but about 25,000 of those hectares are dedicated to desert grapes. So a hell of a lot less. Now, Zareh, the sommelier pointed out and I think this is a really good comparison. Bordeaux has about 110-115,000 hectares of production in their one wine region. Now, I've been focusing on indigenous varieties because I think that's really exciting, but over 30% of the vineyards are actually planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. So keep an eye out, they do label their grape varieties on the bottle so is easy to understand. And if you are looking for those PGIs about 75% of the vineyards are planted in the Thracian Valley, as opposed to the Danube Plain. Now, keep in mind, Bulgaria is on the same latitudes as many of the renowned regions in Italy, in France and Spain. And it's a mix of two climates really. So there's an influence from the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea and the Balkan mountains. So in the north, the Danube Plain, it's a little bit more continental, like a moderate continental climate, so hotter summers, colder winters, and then below the Balkan mountains in the Thracian Valley, it's a little bit more of a Mediterranean climate. So what that means is a longer growing season, even warmer summers and of course, not so cold winters, but cooling breezes from the oceans do a very good job of making sure these wines have finesse, power, but beautiful acidity. Genuinely after tasting these four wines, I am so excited about the wines of Bulgaria and it cost me hardly anything to buy these wines, which I think I am the most excited about.



Janina Doyle 26:08

Now, as always, it's wine quote time, but I recognised I was not going to be able to find a quote about Broad-Leaved Melnik, or Keratsuda. And so I have just relaxed and found what I feel suits this experience of tasting crazy indigenous varieties of Bulgaria. So there is a quote by George Carlin and I am sure you have heard it and he says:



Janina Doyle 26:35

“Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in an attractive and well preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, Chardonnay in one hand, chocolate in the other, body thoroughly used up, totally worn out and screaming, whoa, what a ride.”



Janina Doyle 26:55

I think you can have a bit of a ride with Kaylashki Misket. And a little bit of Mavrud, no? So do see wherever you are in the world where you can get your hands on some Bulgarian wines and then let me know, are you as excited as I am about this? As always, if you haven't subscribed yet, what are you doing? Do it now, click the button, like it, leave your comments. So many of you send me direct messages to say lovely things. Thank you so much, Anything lovely or not lovely, It's appreciated. I can always learn from it. And so take those comments, do just put them on your podcast app, because it does help the podcast become more discoverable. And I'm starting to get bored of saying the same thing. But hey, I have those exclusive content just for you. And that is on patreon.com/EatSleepWineRepeat so for a couple of quid you can have some extra wine podcasts and I will appreciate it truly because it really really helps with the time and the editing and production. So I hope you enjoyed this episode. I hope it was interesting and you've learned something new. I certainly learned something new yesterday. And until the next time everybody, cheers to you!