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Wine Economics Research Centre

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Two book reviews:

The Wines of Georgia, and Swiss Grapes

Kym Anderson

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University of Adelaide

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WINE ECONOMICS RESEARCH CENTRE

The Wine Economics Research Centre was established in 2010 by the School of Economics and the Wine 2030 Research Network of the University of Adelaide, having been previously a program in the University's Centre for International Economic Studies.

The Centre's purpose is to promote and foster its growing research strength in the area of wine economics research, and to complement the University's long-established strength in viticulture and oenology.

The key objectives for the Wine Economics Research Centre are to:

- publish wine economics research outputs and disseminate them to academia, industry and government
- contribute to economics journals, wine industry journals and related publications
- promote collaboration and sharing of information, statistics and analyses between industry, government agencies and research institutions
- sponsor wine economics seminars, workshops and conferences and contribute to other grape and wine events

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Two book reviews:
The Wines of Georgia, and Swiss Grapes

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Book review of

THE WINES OF GEORGIA, by Lisa Granik MW

322 pages. London: Infinite Ideas Ltd., 2019

ISBN 978-1-913022-00-6

US\$39.95 paperback

Reviewed by Kym Anderson, University of Adelaide and Australian National University

Any wine lover with even the slightest interest in wines from the country of Georgia would be familiar with such words as ‘cradle of wine’, ‘8000 vintages’, ‘qvevri’ and ‘supra’. This tiny country – the size of Tasmania and only slightly larger than West Virginia – arguably has the longest history of winemaking from grapes, and is one of the most grapewine-focused countries in the world. It shares with Portugal the honour of having the world’s largest share of national crop area under vines (almost 10%), but has a heritage of producing wine for four times as many centuries as Western Europe. It shares with Croatia the highest unit value among east European countries and former Soviet republics for its wine exports. Moreover, it claims to have more than 400 (possibly 500) native *Vitis Vinifera* winegrape varieties (Ketskhoveli et al. 2012), thus exceeding even Italy (D’Agata 2014) – and many of those grape varieties are not grown elsewhere. So even though Georgia produces barely 0.5% of the world’s wine production, it is certainly worthy of being the subject of a volume in the Infinite Ideas Classic Wine Library.

The author of this book, Lisa Granik, is highly qualified. She became a Master of Wine in 2006, having previously earned a BS and MS in Foreign Service from Georgetown University, a J.D. from Georgetown, and an LLM and JSD from Yale Law School. She first visited the Soviet Union as a law professor on a Fulbright Scholarship (1990-91), but a side visit to Georgia piqued her interest in the newly independent country and in wine. Currently she serves on the governing council of the Institute of Masters of Wine and the advisory board of the Women in Wine Leadership Symposium, and was a board member of the Institute of Masters of Wine (North America) from 2007 to 2018. During 2013-15 she was a Professor of Wine at the New York Institute of Technology, but is now a private consultant and wine writer and continues to visit Georgia frequently.

The book begins by exploring briefly the extremely long history of the country and its wine industry, its fascinatingly complex geology, and its traditional winemaking methods. Many archaeologists dream of working in the region, the most famous westerner being the University of Pennsylvania Museum’s Patrick McGovern (McGovern 2003, 2009; McGovern et al. 2017). In the most-recent two centuries the country’s wine industry, like most other things in Georgia, has been closely tied to developments in Russia, following Georgia’s official annexation into the Russian Empire in 1801. That means it flourished in much of the 19th century’s globalization era, shrunk as phylloxera belatedly took hold leading up to the Russian Revolution, and then became ‘industrialized’ under Stalin’s collectivization mania aimed at maximizing the volume of production when processing was centralized though a state monopoly (Samtrest). By 1980 around 150,000 hectares were under vine. But in 1985 when Gorbachev abruptly introduced his anti-alcohol policies, huge areas of vineyards were uprooted. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was followed by the collapse of the cooperative system and a civil war, causing further abandonment of vineyards – down to

perhaps 40,000 hectares – such that less than one-eighth of the country’s wine was available for export in the 1990s. In the new millennium production and exports began to grow though, and the share of production exported peaked at almost 50% by 2005 before Russia imposed a ban on imports from Georgia. This embargo triggered an export diversification drive, but the area under vines has recovered only to the extent of about 50,000 hectares so far.

Traditional winemaking involved maturation in buried clay qvevri (large amphora) that averaged around 1000 litres but ranged from 100 to 3500 litres. Grapes and stems are fermented and allowed to mature in these vessels for more than six months, for white as well as red varieties. The ‘whites’ thus become amber in colour and more tannic than most other white wines – fitting in perfectly with the current consumer infatuation with ‘orange’ and ‘natural’ wines. Even though today only a small fraction of Georgia’s commercial wine is produced in qvevri, it continues to provide an intriguing point of difference for marketing the country’s product.

The book explains in some detail Georgia’s highly integrated wine and food culture. The word ‘supra’ cannot be translated easily into English because it involves far more than just a feast. Wine is integral, as are myriad heart-felt speeches and toasts led by a ‘tamada’ (toastmaster), plus singing and maybe dancing. Few visitors to Georgia will forget their first supra.

Most of the rest of the book examines the country’s winegrape varieties and regions of production. On varieties, Granik discusses not just those grown currently but also many unique varieties that are beginning to be or could be resurrected by producers. Rkatsiteli and Saperavi are Georgia’s best-known white variety and red variety, respectively. However, the widely varying climate and soils across this tiny country ensure many regions also specialize in one or more other varieties that, over the centuries, have proven their worth in their locale. This diverse genetic stock will be of increasing interest to those seeking alternatives to the world’s most popular varieties, whether just to be different or in response to climate change.

Turning to the key winegrape regions, two-thirds of the country’s wine is produced in the Kakheti region east of the capital (Tbilisi) toward the border with Azerbaijan. That is also the region with the most-developed wine tourism infrastructure, and is only an hour or so’s drive from the capital. Yet just as many pages of the book are devoted to the regions of western Georgia. This detailed coverage of regions (half the book’s pages), and of winegrape varieties, will no doubt interest those wanting to specialize in working with Georgia’s wine industry, but is far more than the average tourist or wine economist is likely to want.

The final chapter briefly summarizes where Georgia currently fits in the wine world and how it might evolve in the future. The industry has moved on somewhat from what was described nearly a decade ago in Anderson (2013), but it is still heavily dependent on export sales to Russia and other formerly planned economies (now including China). Breaking into US, UK and Western European wine markets is its current challenge – and its most obvious opportunity for growing back toward its former size. As it does so, more and more consumers in the west who are interested in new wine experiences (wine styles, winegrape varieties, wine tourism) will be able to discover for themselves this unique place and its wine culture.

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Book review of

SWISS GRAPES: HISTORY AND ORIGIN, by José Vouillamoz.

159 pages. Lausanne: self-published, 2019.

ISBN: 978-1-7291-5744-2

Paperback and Kindle at \$26.99 and \$13.69 at www.amazon.com

(Also in French: *Cépages Suisses: Histoires et Origines*, Lausanne: Ed. Favre, 2017 and in German: *Schweizer Rebsorten: Ihre Geschichte und Ursprünge*, Bern: Haupt Verlag, 2018.)

Reviewed by Kym Anderson, University of Adelaide and Australian National University

Switzerland represents just 0.3% of the world's wine grape cultivation area and global wine production. Barely 1% of that production is exported, and two-thirds of the wine consumed in the country is imported. Why, then, write, publish, or read a book about Swiss grapes? One good reason is that more than 250 different grape varieties are grown on its 15,000 hectares of vineyards, of which about one-third are indigenous and another third are crossings (either spontaneous or from breeding programs). The latter include many PIWIs, that is, fungal-resistant varieties (see <http://www.zukunft-weinbau.de/forschung/piwi-liste/>). True, few of the varieties deemed to have Switzerland as their country of origin (e.g., by Robinson, Harding and Vouillamoz 2012) are grown to significant degrees in other countries. Yet there is an increasing demand from wine growers in all wine-producing countries for more information on alternatives to those relatively few 'international' varieties that dominate the current global mix.

That demand for more wine grape information is driven partly by the desire by current producers to differentiate their product by diversifying their vineyards or reducing their dependence on chemical inputs. That in turn is helped by producer awareness of the impact climate changes (higher temperatures, changes in precipitation, and more extreme weather events) are having on wine grape quality and vineyard yields. One adaptation is to switch to warmer-climate or more-resilient grape varieties. Another strategy is to re-locate to a higher latitude or increased elevation. Part of the demand is driven as well by fledging producers in cooler countries, such as in northwest Europe, as they contemplate investing in a new local industry. At the same time, the biotechnology revolution is providing plant breeders everywhere with new opportunities, which is increasing the interest in exploring and exploiting desired traits (e.g., fungal resistance) of little-known varieties.

A further reason for this book to be valued is because the origins of Switzerland's native grapes are poorly (or mis-)understood. Some varieties were likely introduced by the Romans, others imported from Italy by Benedictine monks, and still others may have come from Egypt or Constantinople.

No-one is better placed than Dr José Vouillamoz to cut through this haze. A Swiss grape geneticist, he is one of the world's leading authorities on the origin and parentage of grape varieties through DNA profiling, having trained with Carole Meredith at the University of California, Davis. In addition to co-authoring with Jancis Robinson and Julia Harding the award winning book *Wine Grapes*, he has authored numerous scientific articles on grape varietal parentage.

The book starts with a brief 5-page history of the grape varieties of Switzerland over the past two millennia. Then, for each of more than 50 native grape varieties, the book presents the main synonyms, history, family tree, etymology, planted area, regions of cultivation, and types of wines produced.

This slim volume is not the magnum opus provided, for example, by D'Agata (2014) for Italian native varieties. But it is sure to be the go-to text for both scholars and wine producers interested in Swiss varieties. Hopefully it will inspire qualified people in other countries to produce similar books for their regions' varieties. It is also an excellent companion for anyone contemplating a stroll through the country's vineyards, not least because it has a colour photo of a grape bunch for each of the reviewed varieties to aid identification of varieties before you reach the cellar door or auberge for a grand tasting experience.

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