

Festival reflects success of Lebanon wine industry

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BEIRUT: While food is one of its proudest exports – filling the bellies of gourmands the world over – think drink, and Lebanon often fails to set taste buds tingling. The organizers of Vinifest 2009 – a three-day showcase of Lebanese wine – are aiming to set the record straight and encourage drinkers from across the region to reach for a bottle of something more interesting than arak or Almaza.

Set on the grounds of Beirut's Hippodrome, the event features 14 independent wineries, as eager to raise awareness of their product as they are to fill your glass with it.

Opening the event, Minister of State **Michel Pharaon** praised the country's producers for putting Lebanon on the global oenological map.

"Lebanese winemakers have perpetuated an ancestral tradition and have proven their uniqueness with the quality of their products," he said.

Lebanon's 18 wineries pump out more than 6 million bottles a year and generate an estimated \$26 million for the Lebanese economy. Most of the wine is exported to Britain and France; a sure sign that Lebanese winemakers are beginning to master their craft.

"Most of the wineries are working on quality more than quantity, and Lebanese wine is getting a lot of international recognition," said Natalie Thomas from the Clos St. Thomas winery.

Andrea, 21, said her friends prefer Lebanese wine to imported varieties.

"Because it's good and it's local, we support it," she said. "Lebanese wine can be only one year old, and still be nice."

Jean-Paul Khoury of Chateau Khoury said that in spite of growing popularity, international opinion was split over Lebanese wine.

"Lebanese wine has two sides to it. When you talk to people abroad, some will always say it is very good. Others [say] it gives them a headache, so opinion is divided," he said. "There is some really good wine in Lebanon now, and most of the wineries are making one or two very good [varietals]."

Fabrice Guiberteau, head oenologist at Chateau Kefraya, Lebanon's second-biggest producer, said that Lebanon's Mediterranean climate made it perfect for producing wine.

"The main thing when making wine is to make it special. Lebanon has beautiful soil for growing vines. Between April and November there is no rain, which gives the grapes the fullest maturity," said Guiberteau, who comes from a family with six generations of winemaking experience in France.

Most wineries are located in the fertile Bekaa Valley, where altitude plays its part.

Chateau Khoury is not alone in cultivating vines at more than 1,000 meters above sea level.

"That's very high compared to the region and – in fact – the world," says Khoury. "It compensates for the warm weather. At this altitude we always have cold nights, even during the summer. This makes the vines easier to use."

Pharaon said that Lebanese wine was proving increasingly important to the economy.

“It is creating jobs and has conjoined with the development of a tourism related to wine that is very popular among Lebanese and foreigners alike,” he said.

Michel, 24, said he hoped to see more wineries emerge soon.

“It’s very good wine, very fresh ... but I don’t know if it’s that well known yet in other countries. I hope we will increase production,” he said. “We usually drink it when we go out, and it’s a normal drink to have at home. We go for Lebanese wine because it’s local and better than imported wine.”

Guiberteau said he hope the event would persuade more drinkers to try the Middle East’s fastest-growing tippie.

“Lebanese wine is the chance to experience the beautiful side of Lebanon,” he said.