

ZORAH

Two piano players sit side by side.

One performs Mozart's Concerto #5, so does the other.

Both play on turn of the century, immaculate Steinway 74 inch grands.

The music could not be more different.

The terroir is identical (the music and the instrument) but the winemaker/pianist interprets them in a personal way and plays them as an individual expression of the grape.

This is the scenario that played on vintage reel-to-reels in my head as I stepped of the platform to experience what is undoubtedly one of the most unusual and ambitious wine-related entities I've yet had the pleasure of being on the sipping end of.

This is Armenia – the new frontier of wine.

In the flank of Mt Ararat lies one of the oldest wine civilizations on earth – spiritual in context and scope with a deliberate confidence that demands the modern world recognize their dirt as one of the original petri dishes of mankind. Everywhere, the sound of silence makes you turn from side to side - the Transylvania-like feel and aura that surrounds the Armenian wilds makes the hair stand on end.

Whether this is the birthplace of wine or not (vines have been here for 1,000,000+ years), one thing is certain – Mozart's Concerto #5 sounds completely different played in the Armenian highlands than anywhere else. With the oldest known "winery" ever discovered or excavated (dating to 6100 years ago), the Armenians know a touch about natural vinification – they also know the scourge of oppression and captive repression from their days under control of the Soviet Bloc.

Now 20+ years on from the fall of the iron fist, Armenia is ready to say Hello to the world – the vinous world that is.

Whether this wine is your #1 of 2012 (or not) isn't really the point (although it will grace more "best of" lists than anyone could/would have thought possible a decade ago). Simply based on facts, imagery and viticulture, the bastion of terroir Zorah sits upon will be recognized as relevant – front page relevant.

The wine?

What's inside each of their bottles puts us over the top.

I mean, giddy over the top.

From arguably the single most beautiful wine production hamlet in the world, this is where nature wins over nurture (spend a few minutes with mouth wide open in awe on their new web site – complete with 40 HD images an Italian photographer gave them to use, he was so taken with Zorah’s beauty – allow all of the images to load, one by one, as you go through the pages:<http://www.zorahwines.com>)

This young vineyard is based on ungrafted Areni Noir (a seemingly distant cousin to Pinot Noir...or is it Cinsault...or Grenache...or Syrah?), taken from a 900 year old monastery's untouched wild parcel of the grape. Zorah’s incredible landscape sits at nearly 5000 ft in elevation astride from the gnarled and imposing mountains that separate Ararat from Armenia. Phylloxera has never been to this remote corner – neither have the Soviets - the mountain land has never been touched by modern agriculture – the roots and vines are authentic.

Last year's 2010 Areni Noir Karasi received winsome and rather lengthy praise (for a TN) from Jancis and this year’s 2011 will go even further. Vinified in clay, steel and barrel, this may be the first amphorae-kissed wine US consumers have ever experienced with that does not strive to be a tangerine dream for the sake of copying the natural wine movement or its ethos. The natural wine movement was born in the Caucasus thousands of years ago and it is still the cradle of the original inspiration for modern pioneers in France and Italy.

That’s a lot of history to place in bottle.

A lot.

The 2011 Karasi is an individual. It’s silken but still elegant and tannic with low-moderate alcohol (13.5-13.7%) and a color that’s dark red/purple and robust. The tone equals the sanguine-meets-grapey visual and the Karasi is nothing if not brilliant in its ability to capture and swallow light..and your imagination. The skins are thick (a la Tain Syrah) but the presence is closer to Nuits St. George. Maybe Cote Rotie meets Sardinia, with a wild and untamed “gypsy” wisp as noted by Jancis? The clay raising takes on an uncharted dimension with Areni Noir as the tannins mimic what you may expect of a 100% oak-aged Left Bank but the even-keeled Karasi sees mostly clay and steel?

This is new.

This is music that flows beyond borders.

Jon Rimmerman

Garagiste

Seattle, WA