

POSTCARD



I first learned of Armenia's modern wine production when researching the discovery in 2011 of the world's oldest site of commercial wine production: the Areni-1 excavation in the mountainous Yeghegnadzor region. There, archeologists have found a significant amount of organic matter, including wine residue on clothing, within a chamber that had been sealed with dung. Relics dating to 4100 B.C. suggest

that wine production and consumption occurred here on a massive scale for centuries.

This small nation comprises 12 distinct climatic zones, all with scant summer rain; the only significant viticultural danger is spring frost. Taking advantage of the favorable conditions, Milan-based clothing designer Zorik Gharibian planted 14 acres of an own-rooted *sélection massale* on gentle slopes outside the village of Areni and launched the Zorah winery in 2006. His holdings now total 100 acres, 44 of which will eventually be devoted to grapes (80% native Armenian varieties). The drip-irrigated vines are trained on single-Guyot trellising at a low 24 inches to protect them from the frost. The local grape, also called Areni, has thick skins—accentuated by the sun's intensity at an altitude of 4,600 feet—and naturally yields only 2-3 pounds of fruit per plant. Viticulturist Stefano Bartolomei removes north-facing leaves to inhibit photosynthesis, leaving the south-facing leaves to provide shade. Since the arid climate offers an excellent opportunity to grow organically, he uses only fava beans, cow manure, and sulfur spray. The fine, loamy soils contain numerous stones of varying size and a high proportion of calcium carbonate; other parts of the country sport a diverse range of soils, including basalt, iron-accented granite, red and yellow clay, pumice, friable limestone, and boulders of all sizes and shapes.

Zorah's famed Italian winemaking consultant, Alberto Antonini (pictured above with myself and Gharibian), is moving away from stainless-steel vinification in favor of wood and, as one would expect in Armenia, clay jars: "When making a premium wine you should smell life—like in cement and oak—rather than the 'death' in steel." A locally made cement foundation with a prefabricated Italian metal frame houses the mechanically fed gravity-flow system, which has a capacity of 70,000 liters. Grapes are basket pressed and fermented at 82°F for two weeks; yeasts were added only in the inaugural 2010 vintage.

At a roadside garage that served as a temporary winemaking facility, I tasted four different base wines, all destined to be blended in varying proportions into two cuvées. The stainless-steel-fermented wine was fresh, clean, and a bit short, showing a light-to-medium body, moderate acidity, a touch of savoriness with hints of blueberry and black pepper, and fine tannins. The sample vinified in French oak displayed raspberry and vanilla notes, with more length and perfume than the base wine aged in American oak. The clay-jar example, fruitier on the nose and entry and fuller in body and tannins, had a longer finish. The final version landed Gharibian a top U.K. importer, but the Zorah label has yet to reach American shores.

Gharibian is also the general contractor for a winery, distillery, fruit orchard, and *agriturismo* project conceived by entrepreneur Armen Aslanian, who retired from his numerous businesses in Russia, Armenia, and the United States to focus on plans for "a place that combines varying elements of traditional Armenian village life." Located in the Aragatsotn region less than an hour north of the capital city of Yerevan, the site uses underground irrigation for organic vines that are buried in the late autumn to avoid winter kill.

Gharibian's two endeavors aren't all we'll be seeing from Armenia. Paul Hobbs is working on a new project with the Los Angeles-based Armenian-Lebanese brothers Vahe and Viken Yacoubian, while Michel Rolland has visited as a consultant for Armenian-Argentine billionaire and Uruguayan wine producer Eduardo Eurnekian.

"Whatever I'm doing, it's new; there's no one to tell me how to do it," said the light-hearted Gharibian. Accustomed to the control he enjoys in the fashion industry, he shook his head at the vagaries of nature involved in winemaking: "What business would allow eight years of investment without ever seeing not only a return, but any indication whatsoever about the salable product?" Upon the discovery of a Paleolithic tool by one of our companions on a tour of his property, he joked, "Tell him to stop finding relics—I want to be known for my wine!"

Cheers, David Furer