

## *Strange places to grow wine*



Wine, these days, is made and vinified in places like Japan, Rumania, India (“Wines of India” says there are some 50 producers in the country! The publisher Peter Csizmadia-Honigh won the OIV Award 2016 in the "Vins et Territoires" category in Paris on 17th October 2016), Canary Islands, Morocco, Georgia. And why? According to an old Newsweek article from 2012: Because “we can ‘trump’ (excuse the political pun) nature, meaning “we can pump precious water to deserts, we have grape clones resisting disease and extreme weather, earth-moving machines replacing poor soil, and reverse osmosis adjusting the intensity of wines..... we can make wines from almost anywhere”.

South America is a continent full of wine producing countries. In fact the World Atlas of Wines says that South America possesses more vines and makes more wines than any continent (except for Europe)...

So how about Colombia? It is the country of Chicha (strong alcoholic drink made from local fermented fruits, from the traditions of the 'Indigenas') and Aguardiente (the 'schnapps' made from sugar cane/molasses with typical local ani-seed, from the Spanish tradition). Then there are 2 large beer brands (amongst smaller other brands) in the country.

Colombians do drink a lot of coffee (you are offered coffee at any event, while shopping in bigger luxury stores, and as welcome and farewell courtesy) and an array of incredible fruit



Coffee plantations

juices (Curuba, Guanabana, etc) and also teas. There is the Yerba Mate with those health Benefits, and coca de mate commonly used to make tea (the latter also chewed directly by many) especially for those high altitude workers and travellers in Central and South America (yes, it does "treat" AMS!)

But we are talking wine:

Colombia's per capita consumption (considering there are approx. 47 million people) is around 0.27 litres per capita, and has been more or less stable since 2007, according to Trade Data and Analysis.

Colombia's area of 1.138910 sqkm spans some 16 degrees of latitude, stretching from the Caribbean to the Amazon jungle, with altitude differences from sea-level to about 5700m above sea-level (the highest point in the Andes). The country is rich in natural resources (in fact very similar to South Africa) eg petroleum, coal, iron ore, natural gas, nickel, gold, copper, emeralds etc. It also exports coffee, cut flowers, bananas etc.

The most wonderful news (viewpoint of the author) came in November 2016 when the FARC and the government signed a peace deal, bringing stability to the country after decades of paramilitary activities, guerrilla conflict, drug wars and kidnappings. If you should ever want to understand life in the 80s and 90s in Colombia, read the book "Kings of Cocaine" or watch the series "Narcos".



tears of terror turn into tears of relief

Wine was taxed by the government in the 1980s and 1990s, and the open market of mostly imported European and US wines slowly diminished. The alternatives were the less costly dry Argentinian and Chilean wines. Of course the top brands, (eg. the big Champagne brands) still remained, being the welcome drink at many fiestas. National wines produced in the Valle del Cauca were sweet, semi-sweet or semi-dry wines. These wines were bought for those baptisms, first communions and marriages.

Here a small insight into a winery that was established in the 1980s by Don Pablo Toro (who studied oenology at UC Davis) near the town of Villa de Leyva. This is not the only winery in Colombia. There are places in Boyaca like the winery of Marqués de Puntalarga, which belongs to a route called “La Ruta de Pueblos y Vinos del Sol de Oro” , a Consortium of some 70 winemakers, producing site specific wines. This consortium has some 250000 “plantings”, produces wine with regional character, with the cultivars of Chardonnay,



Cabernet Sauvignon, and Sauvignon blanc, even Riesling and Pinot noir, selling these in Bogota and in Europe.

The vineyard Ain Karim, at the foothills near Sutamarchán, some 3-4 hours north of Bogota, produces wines under the brand of Marqués de Villa de Leyva. The brand is sold as “Marqués de Villa de Leyva, Vinos Finos del Tropicó”. Don Pablo Toro was also named the “Quijote of wines”, referring to the insanity of his project at the time. At an altitude of 2215m these 50ha of vineyards are still part of the “tropical belt”. In Colombia there was no experience, and no winemaking culture, and to start establishing a vineyard demanded a very high investment, and a long term plan. Over the more than 30 years, the winery has fine-tuned its viticulture and winemaking: Tropical temperatures allow for harvesting grapes every 8 months (no winters); PH neutral soils, good calcium and potassium carbonates; yields of 4 tons per acre.



The winery gives tours to the public: The tours start in the vineyard, vines covered with nets to avoid birds eating the small harvest. They also have a small research plot to experiment with grape varieties. An introduction with a video brings you back to the incredible investment made here: Marqués de Villa de Leyva shows off its grape processing area with a destalking machine, crusher, pneumatic press and many stainless steel tanks, with cooling jackets, of 1000 litres to 6000 litres. Fermentation temperatures in white wines are around 14-18 degrees Celsius, red at 20-24 deg C, the yeasts imported from France. The dark and cool maturation cellar is full of French and American barrels.



Ageing of wines in wood: 6 months for Reserva; 12 months for Gran Reserva and 18 months for Reserva Especial. Marqués de Villa de Leyva produces: Sauvignon Blanc, a Rosé made from Cab S, Chardonnay Reserva and Chardonnay Gran Reserva, Cabernet Sauvignon Reserva and Gran Reserva. Specifically the wines show aromas and flavours with different intensities to what we would expect. Intense maracuya (passion fruit) in white wines is not that typical for European wines. His Cabernet Sauvignon has been positively received as well, from the US to Switzerland, both nations understanding and appreciating the difference to other Cabernets.



Sauvignon blanc



Cabernet Sauvignon

Some of the awards: Sauvignon Blanc 2013 won a Commended in the IWC 2014 and Silver in the Concours Mondial Bruxelles 2014; Cabernet Sauvignon 2011 won Silver in IWC 2014 and the list continues...

The winery produces 20000 to 25000 bottles per year and sells these to restaurants in the capital, Bogota, or overseas. The wines have a “stiff” price tag (the Cab S Reserva costs Colombian Pesos 39000 - approx. 13.7 USD-) even at the winery, and are often more expensive than the other South American wines on wine lists.

In the words of Don Pablo, when he was interviewed in June 2005 about the future and quality of his wines: he said that it is most unlikely that these vineyards would ever produce a European version or a ‘Cono Sur’, but that the wines produced here, would be of excellent quality, “different” and with a “national stamp”. Still rings true today! Salud Colombia!