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Bottles of wine made by Turkish winery Vinkara. The reds are made from native grape Kalecik Karasi, the whites from Narince. Photographer: Elin McCoy/Bloomberg

Bloomberg News

Turkey's Vintners Under Siege as Bans Crush Winemakers

By Elin McCoy
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Trade group Wines of Turkey is showing off the country's top reds and whites at a packed tasting at VinExpo fair in Bordeaux this week while heavy-handed regulations are making it harder than ever for them to sell at home.


In Turkey, which boasts a 7,000-year wine history, seven wine regions, and 800 grape varieties, its more than 100 wineries face new curbs on domestic sales.

Ironically, this is happening just as its wines are getting better and better. Those made from indigenous grapes like okuzgozu and bogazkere are igniting international interest. With dozens of boutique producers established in the past decade, Turkey is experiencing a wine renaissance.

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The recently-passed alcohol bill pushed by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP, the Justice and Development party, was signed into law by President Abdullah Gul on June 10.

This latest effort to control where and when people drink was one trigger for the massive protests at Taksim Square.

"Wine producers are in shock," Taner Ogutoglu, the director of Wines of Turkey, wrote in an e-mail. He'd delivered a letter on behalf of the producers to President Gul, hoping to persuade him to veto the bill. It didn't work.

The regulations make it illegal for shops to sell alcohol between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. and to display bottles where they can be seen from the street. New restaurants and shops near schools or mosques can't offer wine at all.

Sales Curbs

The most sweeping -- and vague -- part of the law is its prohibition on advertising and promotion.

"Everybody in the wine business has a problem now," said Ali Basman, owner of Kavaklidere, the country's largest winery, and president of the Turkish Wine Producers Association, when I reached him by phone.

"It's not easy to sell wine without having ads or ways to explain about the winery or show reviews telling how good a new wine is," he said. "But that's seen as encouraging people to drink. We will have to do more export."

Basman doesn't think he will be able to continue using the winery logo on his business cards or hold special tastings, and will probably have to close down part of his website.

His family founded the winery in 1929. It now owns 550 hectares of vineyards, produces 49 wines, and buys grapes from thousands of growers. If Basman has to cut back on production, who will pay them?

Cappadocian Whites

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Last fall, I stopped by Kavaklıdere's facility in windswept Cappadocia and sipped their crisp sparkling wine outside under a waving red Turkish flag.

I was impressed with their bright, crisp 2011 Cotes d'Avanos sauvignon blanc (\$30) and several reds -- perfumed fruity-smoky 2010 Vinart Kalecik Karasi-Syrah red blend (\$18), 2009 Prestige Okuzgozu (\$30), with its rich red plum and earth flavors, and the ripe, rustic, chocolaty 2010 Pendore Bogazkere (\$30).

One new producer, Ardic Gursel, who started Vinkara winery near Ankara ten years ago, is equally disturbed. Her family also owns the Marmara hotel chain.

"We won't be able to do special wine promotions in restaurants or hotels," she said in an emotional phone interview. "If someone orders a wine over the phone, I won't be able to deliver it. These regulations are quite heavy."

Her goal from the start, she says, was to introduce Turkey's native grapes to the world.

American Launch

She just launched four wines in the U.S., including her delicious 2011 Kalecik Karasi (\$16), a dry, light, fruity red, like a Beaujolais with smoky, volcanic overtones, and her full-bodied 2010 Narince reserve (\$25), a white with tropical fruit flavors and heady floral aromas.

Though the government justified the draconian bill as a way to reduce alcohol consumption, Turks drink only 1.5 liters per person annually, compared to 10.7 in the European Union, according to a 2012 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development health study. A 2011 Turkish Statistical Institute survey found 83 percent don't drink at all.

Sibel Kutman, the commercial director for her family's 87-year-old Doluca winery about 90 minutes from Istanbul, said in a phone call, "We believe the bans are more about ideology. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said -- I don't want to see alcohol, go drink at home."

Kutman's grandfather was the first trained enologist in Turkey.

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Doluca will no longer be able to offer its one-day winery tours from Istanbul. Kutman says new brands will suffer if they can't talk to consumers about their wines. What will happen with wineries' Facebook pages and Twitter feeds is unclear.

"My marketing team is already asking me, 'Do we still have jobs?'" she adds.

Turkey's revitalized wine industry is looking to exports to help sustain it. So grab a bottle of one of their unique wines and raise a glass to the right to buy, discuss and drink.

(Elin McCoy writes on wine and spirits for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own. Muse highlights include Patrick Cole on music and Warwick Thompson on theater. To contact the writer of this story: Elin McCoy at elinmccoy@gmail.com . To contact the editor responsible for this story: Manuela Hoelterhoff in New York at mhoelterhoff@bloomberg.net.