

Turkey's wine producers in need of cheer

By **ELIN MCCOY**
Bloomberg News

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.

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 email. 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.

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

More exports needed

"Everybody in the wine business has a problem now," said Ali Basman, owner of Kavaklidere, the country's largest winery, and presi-

dent of the Turkish Wine Producers Association.

"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 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?

One new producer, Ardic Gursesel, who started Vinkara winery near Ankara 10 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. "If someone orders a wine over the phone, I won't be able to deliver it. These regulations are quite heavy."

Though the government justified the draconian bill as a way to reduce alcohol consumption, Turks drink only 1.5 liters per person annually, compared with 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, "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.

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' Face-

book pages and Twitter feeds is unclear.

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



ELIN MCCOY/BLOOMBERG

Bottles of vino await adventurous tasters at the Kavaklidere winery, Turkey's largest winery.

