

Aug 30, 2018, 10:50am EDT

All The Reasons To Drink Turkish Wine (And What To Eat With It)



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Spirits

The what, where, when of wine, with special attention paid to Italy.

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The 2016 crop of Kalecik Karasi grapevines in Vinkara's vineyards in Kalecik (central Anatolia... [+]

NICOLE HAKLI

“I’m not Turkish,” said [Momofuku Ssam Bar](#) wine director Nicole Hakli at [the first Borderless Wine Symposium](#), held in downtown Manhattan earlier this week, about her own borderlessness. She was here to talk about the wines of Turkey, which she had begun to think about more seriously during visits to the nation's coastal Antalya province, where her husband, Onur, is from and where his family still lives.

... moving hub for winemakers and -drinkers with an eye on quality wine that's either less known in, say, larger cities or in outright danger of disappearing — reasons range from war to heavy-handed anti-alcohol legislation to underappreciated hybrid grape to economic poverty. Weltman has regularly proposed the acts of making, selling, drinking and knowing [wine as forms of do-good-in-the-world](#). The word *emerging* is sometimes applied to regions like these, but that takes as starting point today's wine market and many of these places have been at it for far longer than *that's* been around. I'd say Borderless Wine's immediate point is to bring these wines with so much to tell us into the greater fold. To align today's wine industry, a fledgling member of its millenia-old family, with the wider winemaking world, while stretching into new and future lands, too. The first rule of wine, Weltman said at the symposium, is relationships.

That Monday evening, Hakli presented the land she married into to a filled room. Via its wines Turkey stood with [120-year-old Mission grapevines](#) in Mexico's Guadalupe Valley, [hybrid-wine-grape growers](#) in Vermont and the work, training, industry that winegrowing is bringing to rural populations of the Republic of Georgia, with whom earlier this year Turkey [expanded an existing free-trade agreement](#). She brought two Turkish bottlings for us to taste.

Today In: Food & Drink



“When he would talk about Turkey, he would talk about it with so much excitement and so much enthusiasm,” Hakli said of her husband. The feeling bore out during her first visit to her in-laws in Antalya, and on regular visits since. “The national pride is so great, I saw so many people so collectively excited about Turkey. I thought, What can I do to be a part of preserving that joy?”

A sommelier, she found the answer in an ancient pleasure that is firmly rooted in that country, one that's lost traction there in recent years but never entirely. Southeastern Turkey, at the east end of the Taurus Mountains chain that is the source of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, is a homebase of the Neolithic period, “the millennia-long upheaval in human subsistence and culture resulting from the domestication of plants and animals,” writes [wine archeologist Patrick McGovern](#) in [Ancient Wine](#): of the eight plants that characterize this period, three — chickpea,

the latter descended directly from the former and that it happened here. When it comes to “the region from [western, coastal] Mugla eastward along the coast to Antalya, . . . The wild *Vitis vinifera sylvestris* still grows in the pine forests there, as does in eastern Turkey,” writes McGovern. And if agriculture began there, so might have viticulture, at least one branch of it. Along with those staples and fruits like black figs and [Bursa peaches](#), the country is also cradle to an estimated 500 to 1,000 native wine grape varieties, “about 30 outstanding” these days notes [Wines of Turkey](#) a group of Turkish winemakers whose mission is to market the country's wines abroad. These enticing numbers are one of the things that draws Hakli to Turkey's wines.

Back in 2016, worried about [recent events like the July coup](#) and an attack on Istanbul's airport two weeks prior and about what might happen next, “I was talking to my father-in-law,” Hakli said. “He said, “This is Turkey, just enjoy the wine. The young people will fight the fight. Right now the pendulum is to the right and eventually it'll go back.”

“It's a shared feeling in any of the winemakers I come across in Turkey, when I ask them about the political situation,” Hakli said. That situation is especially pertinent to the country's wine industry, with a series of immediate obstacles to this ancient winemaking area's producers. “One of those is really outrageously high taxation” on making wine. So now, “Most of the quality wines are coming from second careers, in areas like tech. They're passion projects,” she said. “Secondly, it is mostly a Muslim country, so there isn't a lot of wine consumed. However, [raki](#), which is an 80-proof spirit, is the national drink, which is consumed everywhere.” In the 1999 reprint of her 1969 *The Art of Turkish Cooking*, Neset Eren (whose childhood home was the “headquarters of the [Bektashi Order of Dervishes](#)) writes that, “In view of the literal injunction of the Koran against wines, the Turks, a Muslim people, have developed raki — distilled from grapes — as their national drink. . . . In secular Republican Turkey, wines also grace many a table.”

These days, the need to support on the other side of Turkey's border is crucial. Added to the financial constraints is a [ban on marketing at home](#) — try looking through [winery websites](#) to get a feel for these restrictions. Wines of Turkey gives 2013 official figures in their [2014 Prowein presentation](#): in Turkey, “Wine

winemakers are managing the difficulties anyway. An enthusiastic market in the outside wine-drinking world can literally preserve this ancient industry, which had begun moving back into [fine wine territory](#) after all this time. “Interestingly, Prime Minister Erdogan's government isn't entirely against Turkish wine,” [Christy Canterbury MW wrote on Wine Searcher in 2016](#). “It just doesn't want it sold in Turkey. This is the rest of the world's victory.” A decent selection of Turkish wines is [available stateside](#), now. “We taste every year and see how the quality has been improving year after year,” said Hakli. “The growth is exponential.”

In 2018, “It’s happening slowly, but it’s happening; there’s lots of room for this fine wine culture, and it pairs with this cuisine,” she said of talking her new family into what she sees as a natural match — “Why don’t you taste this kebab with this Karasakız, it’s so good.” On the slowly side there’s “the scarcity of the native varieties,” and the difficulties winemakers can have getting non-drinking, quantity-minded farmers to grow with lower yields in mind, to tend vines in quality-focused ways. “There’s a lot of collaboration and communication that has to happen,” Hakli said.

Borders can be intranational, too. In Diyarbakır and Elâzığ, in the southeast area McGovern is researching, “these are more Kurdish neighborhoods and they have some of the stars of native varieties in Turkey,” Hakli said. “Öküzgözü is one of them which is called Bull’s Eye, and then Boğazkere, which translates to *throat-burner*. And they’re typically blended together.” At the symposium, Hakli poured a sparkling wine made by [Vinkara](#), who also makes a Boğazkere and Öküzgözü blend: “Ardıç Gürsel, who is the winemaker, the owner of Vinkara, has to work really hard to communicate with the Kurdish people in these areas, so that she can get the grapes that she wants,” Hakli said, likening Turkish and Kurdish relations to those of Israel and Palestinians. “They have a long-standing relationship and they are just working out. And some days she goes and tries to get grapes and they say, Not today, and she says, OK, I’ll come back tomorrow. It’s a little bit of give and take, and all communication.”

That Vinkara sparkling: “It’s the only one of its kind, from Kalecik Karası [the grape, named for the Kalecik village and the Turkish word for *black*, is native to just outside of Ankara on Turkey's northern side], and it's made by the Champagne method,”

communication woes and financial pressure. And, “sparkling wines were taxed even more [than still wines], because ‘it’s a celebratory wine and we don’t want you drinking it’,” she said of reaction to that extra tax rate. The bottling’s name? Yasasin “which translates to *hooray*, or *yay*.”

“I chose both of these producers because they really embody Borderless Wine; they want to say something bigger through their wine,” Hakli said. Seyit Karagözoğlu, the winemaker at her other winery choice, [Pasaeli](#), is from İzmir on Turkey’s west coast — which tends to be a more liberal part of the country, Hakli points out, and where gold mines opened in the 1990s. “This became a problem for İzmir, which is the third most populous city in Turkey, because it was polluting the water,” said Hakli. Pasaeli’s Karasakız wine (blended with Merlot) is labeled 6N, a play on words that gets you to the Turkish word for *gold*, the grapheme then slashed through, for *n gold*; there is no image of the bottle on his website. “He’s not afraid to use wine to make a statement, not only on [preserving native varieties](#), he’s championed this, but also on the struggles of winemaking in Turkey,” said Hakli. “There would really be no Turkish wine without people like Seyit or Ardiç. If they were [only] tormented by the difficulties of their country right now [it wouldn’t work]. It’s pure passion for them, and joy of wine.”

Next up for Borderless Wine, let’s hope along with Weltman, Turkey’s southeastern neighbor, Syria. Weltman remains in contact with two friends who crossed the Lebanon-Syria border this summer to reach vineyards in Al-Suwayda, about an hour south of Damascus. “This is one of the most hopeful wine regions in the world,” Weltman shared at symposium’s end. In spite of attacks there, “the texts kept coming, images of grapes I’ve never seen, names I’d never heard of, of these native-grape vineyards. And then the bombings,” he said. “But there is also the reality that for some reason wine is an industry, of grapes, of vines, of land, that can compel people to do something more.”

To add to the wine stories we don’t hear enough of, I asked Hakli for some Turkish bottles she would like us to try. Below are five she recommends (most are available at Momofuku Ssam Bar), along with her double pairing suggestions: dishes from the restaurant’s current menu *and* traditional foods of Turkey. “Food and wine pairing isn’t really a thing yet in Turkey (most people drink raki), but we’re working on it”,

Five Wines From Turkey

1. Vinkara Yasasin Kalecik Karasi Blanc de Noirs, Central Anatolia

The wine's orchard fruit and light nuttiness complement the tarator (Kalecik Karasi and walnuts actually grow together!) and scallops' natural sweetness.

Traditional pairing: Walnut tarator (creamy, sharp dip made with walnuts, garlic herbs and day-old bread)

Ssam Bar pairing: Montauk diver scallops with brussels sprouts and green apple

2. Pasaeli 6N Karasakiz, Aegean

Driven by acidity from high-elevation winemaking, this refreshing red Karasakiz brightens smokey kebab and rich pork belly buns.

Traditional pairing: Kebab! ([Adana style](#) is my fave)

Ssam Bar pairing: Pork belly buns with hoisin and cucumber

3. Chamlija Papaskarasi, Thrace

The Papaskarasi grape can make a light bright red wine. With a slight chill it is an appropriate Beaujolais substitute for our country hams.

Traditional pairing: Lamb manti topped with yogurt, hot butter and tomato paste

Ssam Bar pairing: Benton's country ham (Tennessee) with red-eye mayo

4. Sevilen Narince, Aegean

Narince can act a bit like Chardonnay, with quince, orchard fruit, weightier structure, sometimes a creamy texture. It pairs well with grilled or roasted vegetables.

Traditional pairing: Kızartma (Turkish-style fried eggplant and peppers topped with garlic yogurt)

5. Buradan Sirin Grenache Rosé, Cesme

This wine is made in traditional Provençal style, but it's from Cesme on the Aegean sea. It is a natural pairing with seafood and summer salads like piyaz.

Traditional pairing: Piyaz (white bean salad with tahini, mint, parsley, bell pepper, hard-boiled egg)

Ssam Bar pairing: Sardines on toast with chickpea hozon and hearts of palm



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