

Interview:

Darrel Joseph

joseph.darrel@gmail.com

tel +43 676 617 5785

1) The winemaking world knows you as an expert on East European winemaking. As for me, I also know of your Slav roots. Could you say whether it was them that had pushed your interest to that region? And probably also your relocation from the USA to Vienna?

My ancestors come from Croatia and Lebanon. My Croatian grandparents and great-grandparents, and so on, were born when Croatia was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. But this had nothing to do with my original interest in the wines of Central and Eastern Europe and my relocation to Vienna. Back in 1987, I had the chance to be the English language editor of an airline magazine in Austria, and that is why I stayed in Vienna. My interest in wine developed in the early 1990s, as I was inspired by the wines of Austria and Hungary – particularly Tokaji. So I combined my journalistic and marketing communications background to focus on wine writing as a profession. I took wine courses in London, and I began visiting the major wineries of Austria and Hungary. And it all went from there.

2) How long ago did your interest in East European wine expand to the ex-USSR countries, including Russia? Why?

It was a natural progression. Austria and Hungary are two niche wine countries, and they – especially Austria – were just beginning to be discovered by the world. After I began writing extensively about these two countries, other barely-known wine lands in the region became interesting – Slovenia, Romania and Moldova, and then Croatia and other Balkan countries, and then Georgia. I was fascinated with Georgian wines, and therefore was invited to judge in wine competitions in Tblisi and to visit some of the country's wine regions and write about them. Then I was asked to give several wine classes and presentations in Moscow, where I began to get to know Russian wines. So it followed that I would visit Krasnodar and Rostov.

3) For quite a while, you have been judging for all major tasting contests held in Russia. How has Russian wine/winemaking changed for that period of time? Has it reached new summits? If yes, what are they in your opinion?

I think Russian wine is still in a phase of development. And it is going in the right direction. Personally, it is interesting to see what the indigenous grape varieties are doing - such as Krasnostop Zolotovskiy. I have been very impressed with what is being done with this now. But consistent, long-term quality is still somewhat unknown – and that will take time. Many of the wineries in the Krasnodar region work with mainly international grape varieties, and over time, I have seen improvement in expression and character – more focused quality wines that could appeal to all palates. Know-how, technology and vineyards have improved or are being improved.

4) What do you think are the strong sides of Russian winemaking nowadays (if any)?

Sparkling wines have long been a strong point, although from an international perspective, I think the quality was not consistent – up and down, up and down. But in recent years, great strides have been made. Some very good bubbly is being bottled. Also, as I mentioned before, efforts to show what indigenous varieties can do (especially for dry still wines) are showing success.

5) If speaking of the Russian wines, can you state some of them may be competitive – or they can be treated just as some unique, peculiar and original beverages?

Competitive can mean quality, volume and, of course, price. But let's stick to quality and volume for now. In terms of quality, it's there. No question. In terms of volume, then I would say there is not enough to compete on a major international scale. For now, quality

Russian wine would fit more of a niche profile. However, that is not a bad thing. Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia – they all are within the niche wine country category. And the more interested and educated consumers are about wine, then the more interest they will take in niche wine countries.

6) Most Russian and international wine experts/critics say the main value of today's Russian winemaking is its indigenous (autochthonous) varieties. But our winemakers work with international grapes too. Have you noted some interesting Russian wines from classic international grapes – distinctive from wines from international grapes made elsewhere?

Actually, what I've found is that cuvées (blends) featuring both indigenous and international varieties tend to stand out the most – they seem to be more expressive than the single international variety wines. Particularly interesting are Cabernet Sauvignon with, say, Saperavi and Tsimlyansky Cherny. Or Syrah with Krasnostop Zolotovskiy. But ultra-distinctive international variety wines so far need further fine-tuning. The new winery, Usadba Divnomorskoe, for example, is focusing on premium single varietal wines via young vines – like Chardonnay and Gewürztraminer - and these show lots of potential.

7) When speaking of the climatic and geographical peculiarities of South Russian winemaking regions, can you say you are able to distinguish our terroirs – e.g., the Taman peninsula (steppe chestnut black soils with volcanic muds), Novorossiysk (marl soils), the Don Valley?

This is something that I am still exploring.