

# Sommelier INDIA

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# WINE

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MAGAZINE

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CELEBRATING  
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WINE MAGAZINE

Special interest wine magazine for restricted circulation

# WINES OF LEBANON STILL TO BE DISCOVERED

On a recent visit to Lebanon, **Renu Chahil-Graf** discovers Lebanese wine which is getting better known and appreciated around the world

**W**hy would you go to Lebanon, to Beirut, at this time for a story on wine?! This is what I heard time and again as I told friends where I was headed a few weeks ago. I'll stay safe I assured them, it's the Bekaa valley, not too close to where the troubles are, wine country which is sure to have some sense of peace and well-being. If not now, when? The region will continue to be fragile...

When I arrived, I was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm, warm welcome and generous hospitality at every corner in every vineyard and in every home. However, as we tramped through vineyard after vineyard, I realised that while I may have been something of a celebrity in-anticipation, representing a wine magazine from a country of a billion plus people, the real mobiliser was my host and guide. A gentleman, yes, a real gentleman, sixty-something or seventy-something, I forget, who kept us on our toes making sure that I got to taste the best of Lebanon - no holds barred - as interlocutor, charmer, time-keeper, fully covering the agenda of the day and returning home safely before dark. But more on him later...

We started with Château Ksara, ably introduced to us by Rania Chammas, the public relations manager of the estate which was established in 1857 by Jesuit priests who made sweet wine for the church and dry wine for their own consumption. A dramatic discovery was made in 1898 of cellars from Roman times - considered the most beautiful cellars in the world. Indeed the mystery builds up as you follow Rania clanging a large chain with innumerable keys, passing rooms with metal bars, reminiscent of medieval dungeons, till finally an impressive, large-sized padlock is

opened with an equally impressive key and we enter the cellars and gasp with amazement. Narrow winding corridors, heading every which way are lined with rows upon rows of bottles, covered with centuries of history, we are swept into a time warp. Cautiously following our guide, we are finally led back to the real world and mount a handsome staircase to the spacious and well-appointed tasting room of the Château.

Château Ksara prides itself on focussing on quality rather than volume. However, it is Lebanon's largest producer and makes 14 wines, red, white and rosé. While they produce an excellent and affordable Chardonnay, Cuvée du Pape 2011 and a Cabernet Sauvignon 2009, the sublime stars of the show at this Château are Cuvée du Troisième Millénaire 2009 (Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot and Syrah) and Le Souverain 2008 (Cabernet Sauvignon and Arinarnoa). Although Château Ksara exports to 40 countries, the main market for its wine until recently was Syria. *For more details on the wines: [www.ksara.com.lb](http://www.ksara.com.lb)*

We next head to Domaine des Tourelles, a far cry from the smart Ksara but infused with charm and history in an old building with wooden beams, photographs of the original French owner, Francois-Eugene Brun and the workers, Paulette and Juliette. The vineyard was started in 1865, and the winery established as Lebanon's first commercial winery in 1868. A boutique winery, it still has concrete vats, grapes are always harvested by hand and bottles are recycled. Ageing takes place in French and American oak barrels. After the passing away of Pierre Brun, the vineyard was under threat of a takeover by large wine conglomerates. But a courageous group of families put together a consortium to raise the

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Above: Château Ksara in the Bekaa Valley is the largest producer of wines in Lebanon. Below: Domaine des Tourelles vineyard, planted in 1865





The original building at Domaine des Tourelles which retains its old world charm

Infused with charm and history, Domaine des Tourelles is a boutique winery in an old building with wooden beams and photographs of the original french owner. starting in 1865 it was established as the first commercial winery in Lebanon in 1868



Above: Château Kefraya vineyard in winter. Kefraya is the second largest winery in the Bekaa Valley. Below: Fabrice Guiberteau, winemaker at Château Kefraya



different terroir – is slated to be excellent. Château Kefraya is also known for its distinctive labels showing concert instruments. Fabrice noted that Château 2009 (Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Carignan and Mourvedre) would pair very well with Tandoori Chicken.

For more details on the wines: [www.chateaukefraya.com](http://www.chateaukefraya.com)

In a completely different location in the northern region of Batroun lies a cluster of eight wineries with grapes grown at higher elevations of between 400 to 1,300 metres. Among these is Ixsir, a recent establishment that has made remarkable progress in its short six to seven years of existence.

Arriving at Ixsir we are struck by its stunning location on a hilltop with sun-drenched views across mountain ranges and down the valley. But there are even more surprises to come – a warm welcome by Hady Kahale running down a tall, wide stone staircase and escorting us into the interior of a century's old structure, which was abandoned in 1900 but has been reconstructed and transformed into an elegant and appealing space, full of light and old stones.

We learn about the history of the region, as well as the principles behind the design of the winery. It is evident that persons who have worked in the wine industry from the grassroots up have created this practical and efficient winery.

The vision behind Ixsir is to reveal the best terroirs of Lebanon, some forgotten long since. Cultivated with respect to sustainable agriculture, Ixsir's vineyards are spread in the mountains of Lebanon on clay-calcareous and limestone soil, from Batroun to Jezzine, benefiting from the unique microclimates Lebanon has to offer. Ixsir's vineyards culminate at an altitude of 1,800 m, making them the highest in the Northern Hemisphere.

While it has won green energy and other awards, what is equally impressive is the strong educational element of enlightening visitors on winemaking processes as well as the trees on the property from which corks are made, and different grape varieties grown on a sample plot at Ixsir.

The name Ixsir derives from "Iksir", the original Arabic word for "Elixir". It is not surprising then to find that the wines produced are excellent, with a long finish on the palate. Carefully handcrafted by Ixsir's winemaker, the wines reflect the purity and freshness of the Lebanese mountains, through richness, elegance and complexity.

El Ixsir is the flagship wine with its depth of colour and complexity (Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot), but equally impressive is the Grande Reserve 2009 (Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon). The Altitudes line is considered a good match for Indian cuisine, especially the Altitudes 2011 with its blend of Muscat, Viognier, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. *More on the wines: [www.Ixsir.com.lb](http://www.Ixsir.com.lb)*

And now to return to my host, Maroun Massoud, who had his first taste of wine at 14 or 15 years of age and has never stopped appreciating its ever-evolving qualities, both during the years he lived in France and now back in Lebanon. With his in-depth knowledge and a great love for the wines

needed resources and saved it as a small, independent wine producer, maintaining its own identity and providing livelihoods for the two families that own it and its 40 employees. The animated, young and knowledgeable winemaker, Faouzi Issa and marketing person, Christiane Issa Nahas, are proud to transmit their own identity to the wines – and indeed have been successful in blazing a path.

Domaine des Tourelle's Marquis des Beys label, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah, having received a Decanter award. Other remarkable wines include the Blanc 2011, with its unusual blend of Chardonnay, Viognier and Muscat d'Alexandrie, Syrah and Tempranillo. This is indeed a gem of a vineyard that needs to be nurtured, preserved and promoted. *For more information see: [www.domainestourelles.com](http://www.domainestourelles.com)*

At Château Kefraya, Fabrice Guiberteau, the indefatigable, knowledgeable and devoted winemaker and technical director, reminds us that 5,000 years ago the Phoenicians built the Temple of Bacchus in Baalbek, with all its wine symbolism. The calcaire in the soil and the exceptional sunshine made the region a prime location for

producing abundant and high quality grapes. Michel de Bustros was the soul, the vision and the source of dynamism for the development and expansion of the vineyard. While it existed since 1951, it was only in 1979 that wine production started, and grapes were no longer sold to other vineyards. Although it is the largest vineyard in size and acreage, it is the second largest in production. We are informed that there is no irrigation in the vineyards, all harvesting is done by hand and no chemicals are used on the crops. Their aim is to produce a wine that reflects Kefraya's unique terroir.

Walking between the vines with this passionate winemaker who clearly loved his grapes above all else was an unforgettable experience. His face lit up describing how the same vines grown on different terroir, within the village of Kefraya, had dramatically different tastes. We were given the distinct privilege of tasting the difference with selections extracted using large, elegant pipettes from the silent barrels themselves, quietly doing their work in an almost sanctified atmosphere.

The flagship wine of Château Kefraya is clearly Comtesse de M, the 2012 comprising 70% Chardonnay and 30% Viognier and having spent 24 months in new barrels. The Cabernet Sauvignon 2014, still in barrels – and of two



Above: The exterior of Ixsir Winery, an elegant and appealing space, full of light and paved with old stones. Below: Ixsir's Jezzine vineyard. The soil here consists mainly of calcareous clay and limestone

Ixsir, a recent establishment that has made remarkable progress in its short six to seven years of existence has a stunning location on a hilltop, with sun-drenched views across mountain ranges and down the valley



of his country, he unequivocally declares that his favourites remain Souverain from Château Ksara, Comté de M from Château Kefraya and Syrah from Domaine des Tourelles. Nevertheless, he is not averse to learning to appreciate the newer productions, especially the ones from Ixsir such as his just received bottle of EI!

Back to the beginning – Lebanon, war, civil strife, wine – how does it all fit together? There was unanimity in the responses, ranging from: “Through a providential hand, the war stopped the day before the harvest! Wine growing and winemaking is a joint effort of the Muslims and the Christians, a working partnership. Some drink, some don’t, but all gain from the process. While war doesn’t affect the production, it can affect the market...”

Which brings me to the conclusion that Lebanese wines should be more widely available, beyond those just found in Lebanese restaurants abroad. They need to be discovered and appreciated by all wine aficionados around the world. Even though there is the temptation to let them remain as one of those “best kept secrets”! ❖

## TRAVELLING TO LEBANON

- Middle East Airlines is the national carrier but most airlines from the Gulf have daily flights to Beirut.
- Lebanon has top, international standard hotels, remarkable restaurants, beaches and mountains.
- Cars with drivers are available at the airport for trips to wine territory.
- The best book to read is Michael Karam’s “Lebanese Wines – An Independent Guide”. Turning Point Books, February 2013