

# LEBANON PROMOTES ITS MODERN-DAY, FRENCH-INSPIRED WINE INDUSTRY

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Despite its ancient history of wine production and a climate well-suited to vine growing, Lebanon's wine industry has experienced a series of setbacks over the centuries. **Elie Maamari**, export and marketing director of Château Ksara, told of the major milestones in the country's wine history with a review of its current status.

Records from the Neolithic era show that Mesopotamia is considered as the birthplace of *vitis vinifera*, whose spread is recorded from Mesopotamia to Britannia. History also says that Noah was the first vine grower and winemaker and that the first vine growing is traced back to the Phoenician ancestors of Lebanon. Around 2800 BC Canaanites/Phoenicians traded in wine, cedar timber and olive oil from Byblos (Lebanon), the ancient seaport located on the coast of the

Mediterranean Sea. During the Greco-Roman era, the divine beverage of Lebanon was an object of worship.

The temple of Bacchus, their largest temple, was located in Baalbeck, only 27 km from Château Ksara. Baalbeck, also referred to as Heliopolis, the 'city of sun' boasts 300 days of sunshine, giving Lebanon's wines their uniqueness.

In modern day history, from 1516 until the end of WWI in 1918, the Ottoman Empire ruled Lebanon. The Ottomans ceased alcohol production except for wine produced for religious Christian purposes, thereby destroying many vines. The French mandate for Lebanon (1923-1946) was founded after the First WW1, ending Ottoman rule in Lebanon. The French encouraged wine production and vine growing again.

## Greater industry structure

The present-day vineyard stretches over 3,000 hectares and in 1997, the Union Vinicole du Liban was created by Ksara, Kefraya and Musar. The association, whose name is a nod to the French influence in the country, now has 19 members and Lebanon has been a member of OIV since 1995.

The National Wine Institute of Lebanon was established in 2013 and is involved in developing production, quality control and analysis, the study of soil and adequate grape varieties, and legal and commercial follow-through. Similar to the French AOC system, it was indeed inspired by it. Of the total vineyard area producing arak and wine, 62 % is located in the Bekaa, 24 % in the North, 11 % in Mount Lebanon and 3% in the South of Lebanon.

In total there are 39 wineries in Lebanon with total production capacity of 800,000 bottles. Château Ksara holds 38% of the market.

Bekaa has 17 wineries, Mount Lebanon has 11, the North has 8 and the South, 1. Lebanon's climate is ideally suited to wine growing, with temperatures ranging from 30°C to 12°C and -5°C in wintertime. Annual rainfall ranges from 600-700 mm plus 15-20 days of snow.

The vineyards do not need irrigation and snow acts as a natural pesticide. The vines are planted on steep terraces and hillsides, all grapes are hand harvested, the wineries use eco-friendly practices due to low risk of rot and the country enjoys 270 days of sunshine. Most Bekaa Valley vineyards are located 1,000 m above sea level. Vineyards boast 80% of calcareous soil (only 5% of the planet) with high concentrations of limestone and clay, often with gravelly mixes on the terraced vineyards and good drainage.

Besides wine, Lebanon also produces significant amounts of the distilled drink arak.