



wineries, has lowered the natural sugar levels of its grapes (and the alcohol content of its wines) by planting its vines on hills. 'Planting vineyards at altitude, where the temperature varies greatly between day and night, leads to greater complexity and colour density,' says commercial director Emile Majdalani.

This explains why so many Lebanese vineyards lie at an altitude of 900m to 1,200m, even those outside the Bekaa Valley, like Château Belle-Vue, in Bhamdoun Village. This winery is one of the positive stories to come out of the civil war. Its founder, Naji Boutros, wanted to help rebuild the village he was born in, and decided to plant a vineyard in an area known only for its table grapes, on the Beirut side of the Bekaa Valley. He, his American wife Jill, and their four children began planting in 2000 and their first vintage was released this year. Belle-Vue's wines can be hard to find as yields are deliberately low. They are sold

Above: Harvest time at the renowned Château Musar in the Bekaa Valley

through a wine club and even members are only allotted one case a year. But Boutros is planning to expand production and, in the meantime, you can taste its wines in several London restaurants.

Historically, France and Lebanon have always been close and the French winemaking influence here is very strong, with many wineries employing either French consultants or French-trained winemakers. This explains why most Lebanese winemakers use Bordeaux or Rhône grape varieties for their red wine. But varieties traditionally found in Arak (an aniseed-flavoured drink and a national institution) are also used to make white: Obaideh is thought to be related to Chardonnay and Merwah to Semillon.

Less traditional grapes are also grown. Massaya is experimenting with indigenous grapes similar to Grenache; Château >

LEBANON: SIX OF THE BEST By Mark O'Halleron

Château Ka, Source Blanche, Bekaa Valley 2008 ★★★ (16/20)
Floral, apples, melon and mineral. Fresh pear, berry and sweet spice. From 2009. **£10.99; Wsi, WTB**

Château Belle-Vue, La Renaissance, Bhamdoun Village 2005 ★★★★★ (16.5)
Spicy red fruit, liquorice, roasted meat. Youthful, generous and long. From 2009. **£45; Euw**

Château Kefraya, Bekaa Valley 2004 ★★★★★ (16.5)
Fresh and food friendly with leather, spice, coffee and cherry fruit. From 2009. **£22.45; Evy**

Massaya, Gold Reserve, Bekaa Valley 2005 ★★★★★ (16.5)
Youthful, fresh, leaf and truffle notes. Full, fine tannins. From 2009. **£22-£27; CeD, DII, F&M, Har, Nsn, Pip, Tan, WWin**

Château Kefraya, Comte de M, Bekaa Valley 2002 ★★★ (16)
Cigar, blackberry, nuts and figs. Smooth, weighty and textural. From 2009. **£25.95-£33.19; Evy, Nsn**

Château Ksara, Cuvée du Troisième Millénaire, Bekaa Valley 2005 ★★★ (16)
Bold, meaty, leathery, mushroomy. Vibrant, spicy, currant fruit. From 2009. **£26.99; Bns, Han, Nou**

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