

# mountains of the med

LEBANON'S MOUNTAINOUS BHAMDOUN REGION HAS ALL YOU NEED TO MAKE GREAT WINE. HENRIETTA CLANCY ACCOMPANIES THREE TOP SOMMELIERS AS THEY VISIT THE AREA, AND PARTICIPATE IN THE CREATION OF A NEW VINTAGE AT CHATEAU BELLE-VUE.

W inemaker Naji Boutros's four-wheel drive is meandering between vineyards in what looks like a residential suburb of Beirut. Many of the vines scattered around here seem haphazardly tagged on to gardens and sandwiched between Greek Orthodox and Maronite churches.

This is Bhamdoun, and the terraced mountainside vineyards produce wine for Chateau Belle-Vue, a micro-winery producing around 20,000 bottles a year.

Amounting to 60 acres of land, these vineyards sit from 1,000 to 1,300 metres above sea level, benefiting from changing temperatures in an essentially Mediterranean climate – hot and dry from April to October and cold and damp in winter.

Boutros is in the process of telling Rosan Sayburn MS (Hôtel de Ville), Thomas Sorcinelli (The Ritz, London) and Myriam Lombard (The Ritz Club, London) – all already fans of the wines – about the

wonders of this terroir. Nearby roadworks mean that a digger has cut a huge slit out of a hill, perfectly showcasing the region's complex soil – stony, heavy in minerals, calcareous and clayish. Clay, limestone and silt are presented in pretty layers.

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Petit Verdot, Sauvignon Blanc and Vignier are grown here under the

## THE TERROIR OF MOUNT LEBANON IS VASTLY DIFFERENT TO THAT OF THE BEKAA VALLEY

appellation of Mount Lebanon. Its terroir is vastly different to that of the country's best-known viticultural area, the Bekaa Valley. Summers in Bhamdoun are long and dry, while the mountains surrounding Mount Lebanon provide natural irrigation, perfect for growing grapes.

Of course, it isn't pure chance that Boutros has stumbled upon such favourable conditions for his vines. This

land has a rich history of viticulture. The Phoenicians knew it, as did Boutros's more recent ancestors, but for several reasons – most significantly, the civil war – Bhamdoun's wine culture lay dormant for over 25 years.

In 1990, when the Boutros family relocated here from London they found a faded Christian village whose history of viticulture was reduced purely to table grapes – sad, as the conditions for fine wine production are impressive.

### SMALL BEGINNINGS

In general Lebanese wine hasn't been all that adventurous in recent years. The success of several wineries during the 1980s (most notably Chateau Musar) meant that it became associated with a particular style of wine. However, with around a dozen other small wineries in Lebanon – a number that's growing every year – the country's boutique wine scene is beginning to gain recognition.

An artisanal, handcrafted element is at



ABOVE: NAJI BOUTROS AND HIS WIFE JILL, OF CHATEAU BELLE-VUE. TOP RIGHT: ROSAN SAYBURN MS. BOTTOM RIGHT: THOMAS SORCINELLI



Vue grows Merlot in two different areas: the first is exposed to the south-west with clay-rich ground comprising stones and fine sand, while the

second is from a mineral rich vineyard to the north-east. The expression of both soils is clear, and the Merlot boasts a pungent nose of red fruit, silky tannins and delicate minerality.

Sayburn declares the Cabernet Franc, a relatively new grape to Lebanon having only been introduced in the past 10 years, 'a revelation' in terms of its robustness. With a north-eastern exposure, the Cabernet Franc vines benefit from the

cellar in the centre of Bhamdoun. Boutros's wife, Jill, is on hand to make sure we've tasted samples from the oak barrels (new French oak: Seguin Moreau and Radoux), where the wine from each specific grape variety has rested for two years, readying itself to be blended in this new vintage.

The sommeliers taste each varietal and observe the distinctive terroir, while discussing the final blends of the previous four years and assessing how each has aged. In all four vintages produced so far, Syrah and Cabernet Franc have been the mainstays – always added in equal measure – supported by Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, which was introduced in 2006 to increase ageing potential.

As Sorcinelli points out, the Merlot is incredibly suggestive of its terroir. 'I'm getting gunpowder and stainless steel – a very strong minerality on the nose', Belle-

view grows Merlot in two different areas: the first is exposed to the south-west with clay-rich ground comprising stones and fine sand, while the

## AN ARTISANAL ELEMENT IS AT THE CORE OF CHATEAU BELLE-VUE'S ATTITUDE TO BLENDING

view grows Merlot in two different areas: the first is exposed to the south-west with clay-rich ground comprising stones and fine sand, while the

early morning sun, and are spared any damage from direct sunlight during the heat of the day. The rose-coloured soil has provided this grape with aromas of spice, specifically cloves. On the palate it's fresh and tannic with notes of red peppers.

flavours. The tannins, meanwhile, are soft and well integrated.

It's clear that the Cabernet Sauvignon varietal thrives in the Bhamdoun terroir, when subject to an extremely low yield strategy – flourishing in the arid soil and responding to the challenge of its story environment.

Intensely coloured, the Cabernet is bursting with spicy aromas, fresh and intense on the palate and packing a powerful tannic punch that manages to remain delicate and well integrated.

### THE FINAL BLEND

Perhaps because of this, Lombard suggests that the Cab's presence is upped from the 10% in the 2006 vintage, to a full 20% this year. 'I think it's worth increasing the ageing potential of the wine,' she says. The percentages of Syrah and Cabernet Franc are very slightly reduced to make way for the extra structure from the Cabernet, and all agree that it's for the best.

Sorcinelli is keen to increase the Merlot offering from 2006's 10%. His views are taken on board and the blend is adjusted accordingly, but all decide, on tasting, the

new blend is a little too fruit-driven and lacks structure. The final blend chosen by the sommeliers and winemaker is 35% Syrah, 35% Cabernet Franc, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon and 10% Merlot. As well as fruit-depth and intensity, it also has great acidity and masculine tannins to ensure that it develops well in the bottle.

With land at a premium in Bhamdoun, and many producers planting vines on small family plots, this isn't an area that's going to challenge the Languedoc for volume. But if the estimable Belle-Vue winery is anything to go by, this once devastated village on Mount Lebanon, has an enormously bright future ahead of it. ■

For stockist info call: 07909 350 021