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For once, the hype seems justified — but you'll struggle to get hold of many top bottles

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Since Brexit, importing wine into the UK has become a bureaucratic pain, even for established shipments. So imagine the amount of work required to import sample bottles from as many as 55 producers, most of them without UK importers, based in 15 central and eastern European countries.

Such was the task facing Hungarian wine marketeer Zsuzsa Toronyi and British Master of Wine Caroline Gilby when they decided to organise the Ultimate CEE Wine Fair in London in June, an event they billed as “The Next Big Thing in Wine”.

Their argument centres on the wide variety of indigenous grape varieties and the winemaking skill evident in these countries. The fashionable word “authentic” featured three times in their sales pitch, and to judge from the 60 wines I tasted, the hype is justified.

It helped that Gilby has been specialising in central and eastern European wine for decades so was well able to pick out reliable and interesting producers from Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine.

A total of more than 500 wines were shown in the airy vastness of St John’s Church, Waterloo — far too many for a single taster, so I split the task with my colleague Tamlyn Currin and concentrated on what was on offer from Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Romania and Ukraine.

For obvious reasons the Ukrainian table, showing off the wares of the Ukrainian Wine Company UK, won the sympathy vote. The company represents seven handpicked wineries in what is left of Ukraine's terroirs. (Crimea used to be their vinous trump card.) I was especially taken by Beykush winery's rendition of Telti Kuruk, a grape speciality of the Odesa region supposedly imported long ago from Turkey. The 2022 vintage had really mouth-filling, peachy fruit and admirable structure.

Only one Armenian winery was represented in the main tasting: Keush Family Winery, whose sparkling K2 Blanc de Blancs 2019 from Voskehat grapes was nothing like champagne but was hugely satisfying with its refreshing lemon curd flavours.

Of the other countries whose wines I tasted, Croatia was the most stimulating. The wines, especially those from Istria in the north-west of the country, seemed to have an extra layer of sophistication. The region's special white-wine grape Malvazija Istarska (nothing to do with most other Malvasias) produces full-bodied wines with an apple-skin character, real grip and ageing potential.

My favourite examples at the tasting were made by the well established Kozlović winery and the much younger enterprise owned by the Fakin family. Each of them also showed an exceptional example of the local red wine grape Teran, whose wines can be tough in youth, but the trend is now to pick grapes a bit riper, so with more generous fruit. Elsewhere it's called Terrano.

South of Istria on Brač, one of the hundreds of islands that dot the turquoise Adriatic, Stina makes an excellent 2023 example of the local Pošip grape, a white wine so marine-scented that it reminded me of Galician Albariño. It's also, unlike most of the wines shown at St John's, available in the UK (see recommendations box). Stina's 2019 Plavac Mali is made from the ancient Croatian red-wine grape that is closely related to Zinfandel (which in its native Croatia goes by the delightful name Tribidrag). Vislander makes another good Plavac Mali from a single vineyard on the island of Vis, as well as a fine version of the island's aromatic Vugava white-wine grape with its apricot and grapefruit sensations. Just one more example of a wine that is unique to its source.

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The other country whose wines really excited me, billed as a “guest” at this tasting, was Cyprus. I am keenly aware that talk of wine revolutions has been cheap but wine production on this far eastern Mediterranean island really has been completely transformed, from four big companies making cheap copies of sherry and oxidised table wines shipped in bulk to Russia to, now, a host of independent winemakers turning out wines of real finesse and interest. Factors include cool nights in vineyards up to 1,500m above the sea, ungrafted vines because the island is phylloxera-free, and a propitious limestone base in many vineyards.

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Zambartas seemed the best of the seven wineries represented at the tasting and, like most, produces some very decent dry white from the island's Xynisteri and Promara grapes. Cypriot red wines of distinction are starting to be made from the local Lefkada and Maratheftiko grapes. The best Cypriot wine I tasted, however, was of a type that has been made on the island for centuries, the rich, dark, sweet, oak-aged Commandaria 2016 from Kyperounda: Christmas in a bottle.

There are apparently about 50 wineries in mountainous Bosnia and Herzegovina. Wines from just two of them were shown in London, both from near Mostar in Herzegovina. Carska Vina's name translates as Imperial Wine, a reference to the time when this region was an important supplier of wine to the Austro-Hungarian empire. Both it and Škegro Family Winery make excellent examples of firm, characterful white wines from the local Žilavka grape which seemed much more successful than the reds from local varieties Blatina and Trnjak.

The selection from Romania, home to many a Fetească vine, was more variable than some, but then Romania is already better represented on the UK market than most of these countries.

The standout Romanian producer was Mosia Galicea. Its 2018 dry white Tămâioasa Românească from old, organically cultivated vines was one of the oldest wines shown and was still going very strong indeed. This Muscat wine had almost lost its youthful grapiness and was now a complex, dry white with real structure.

In very general terms, the whites in the tasting were a bit more potent than the reds, which tended to be a little less fresh aromatically and to demonstrate a certain eastern European enthusiasm for tannin over fruit.

But overall, the experience of so many new flavours and names convinced me that, as the organisers had promised, “central and eastern European wines should be on the radar of anyone seeking the next big wine story”.

Jancis recommends ...

Eastern promise: the best whites and reds from the region on sale in the UK

WHITE

- Beykush, Telti-Kuruk 2022 Odesa, Ukraine (12.5%) £27 Ukrainian Wine Co
- Clai, Sv Jakov Malvazija Istarska 2019 Istria, Croatia (15%) £36.24 Howard Ripley
- Feravino, Dika Graševina 2022 Slavonia, Croatia (12.5%) £14.50 London End Wines, £14.95 TB Watson of Dumfries, £15.95 Harris & Co of Castle Douglas
- Mosia Galicea Mare Tămâioasa Românească 2018 Oltenia, Romania (12.5%) £15 Meats Bazar and Prahova stores
- Stina, Pošip 2023 Brač, Croatia (13.5%) £29.03 Strictly Wine, £29.64 Great Wines Direct, £33.73 Corking Wines
- Testament Pošip 2020 Dalmatia, Croatia (12.5%) £21.99 Novel Wines

RED

- Aurelia Visinescu, Artisan Feteasca Neagră 2020 Dealu Mare, Romania (12%) £21.50 The Old Cellar and soon The Jolly Merchants
- Testament, Dalmatian Dog Babic 2018 Dalmatia, Croatia (13%) £14.99 Novel Wines

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