

Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan – do they really make wine there?

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About a year ago (late July 2013), Ludo and I were preparing the route for the WINE Explorers' project. We were gently tearing our hair out trying to fit 92 countries into a 3-year schedule in which we couldn't see the end. Imagine for a moment having to schedule your trips until June 2017... It felt weird!

I remember it like it was yesterday. Ludo asked me with astonishment: "Is there is wine in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan?". "Yes," I replied hesitantly. According to the research done on these countries – on the Internet and in some old books – traces of wine production there seemed to be present.

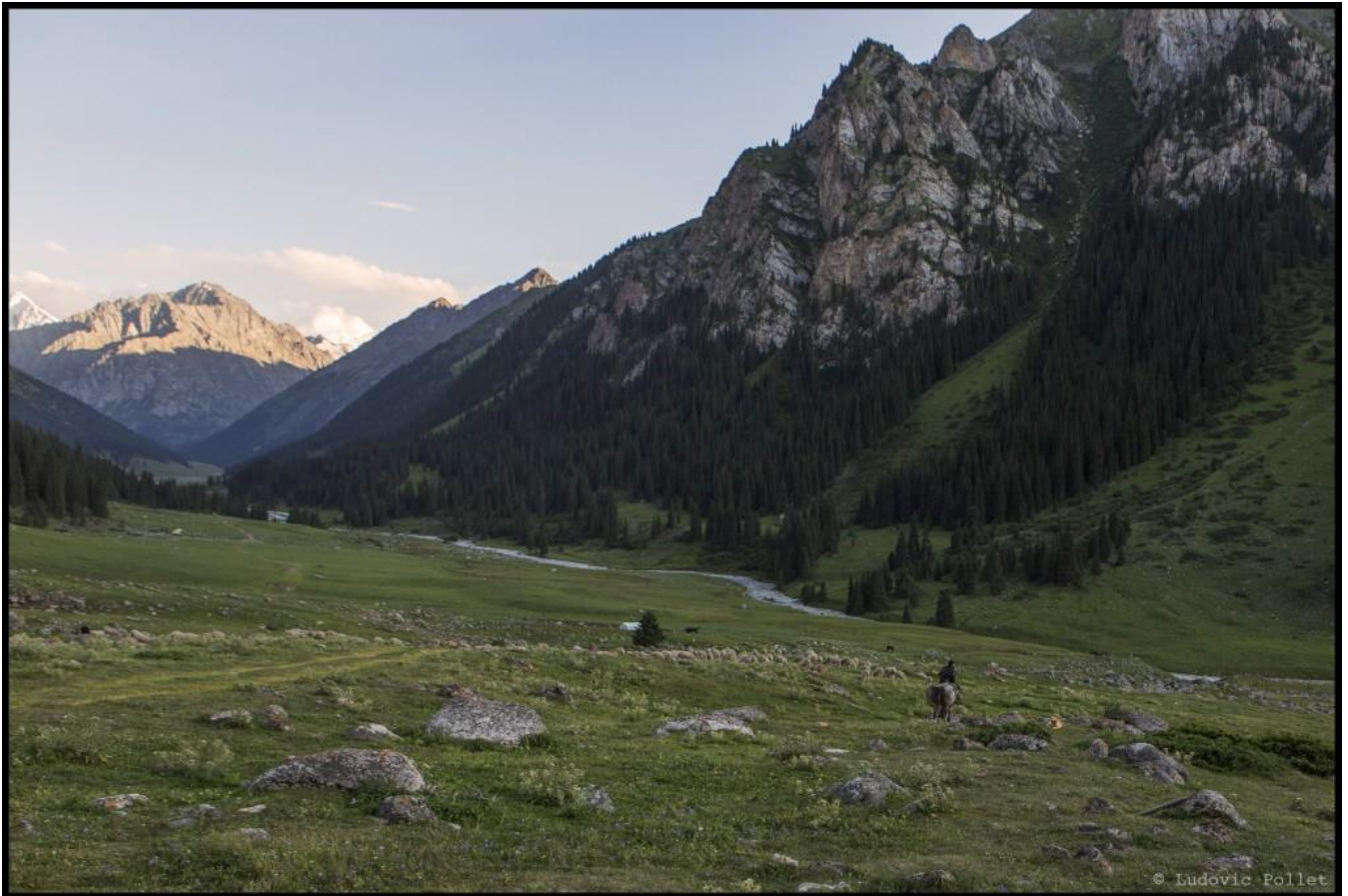


It only remained for us to go there and see for ourselves.

But first it was still necessary to locate these -stan⁽¹⁾ countries on a world map. Because these destinations don't spring to mind as holiday destinations. (Wrongly! But let's talk about this later).

Kyrgyzstan and the anti-alcohol policy of Gorbachev

Upon exiting the plane, we found ourselves in the countryside. The sunshine was dazzling, with a pastel blue sky. It was 41 ° C under a blazing sun. We were surrounded by fields of freshly cut corn and the mountains with their tops still covered by snow, provided a beautiful backdrop. One unique road – littered with carts full of fruit and vegetables, hawkers and traditional pottery – connects the airport to Bishkek, the capital. This scenic beauty reminded me with nostalgia of the countryside of my childhood in Picardy, in northern France.



We were seeking information. A former Minister of Agriculture agreed to meet us in one of the few wine bars of Almaty. The place was cold and deserted. The decor was virtually non-existent. “This is normal, he explained, since the importation of wine is very new in the country and most Kyrgyz have neither the means nor the education to drink wine”. Wine was produced here in the twentieth century: 13 cooperatives produced mainly sweet wines and sweet effervescents (230,000 liters of bubbles per year anyway). “But everything was snatched in 1985, in the name of the anti-alcohol policy of Gorbachev’s government, with the aim to eradicate alcoholism in the USSR”. A turning point in the Kyrgyz wine industry...

The revival of Kyrgyz wine is not (yet) for tomorrow

There are a few factors which make investment in the wine industry in Kyrgyzstan unlikely. First off wine consumption is close to zero, secondly new vines need several years to produce fruit – it takes a long time before a return on investment can be seen – and lastly the unfortunate instability of the economic situation in Kyrgyzstan – in reference to the two recent revolutions of 2005 and 2010 – which might very well have a detrimental effect on investor confidence. It seems that the actions of the former Soviet Union still casts a shadow on the wine industry in this country.



Grain is now exclusively grown for the production of vodka and other brandy. Paradoxically, legislation on certain types of alcohol became very soft and it is not uncommon to find "homemade" beverages such as *bozo* (a grain alcohol reaching 30 °C) or *kymyz* (fermented milk with neutral alcohol) in the mountains. How frustrating... We would have liked to meet some Kyrgyz winemakers in order to understand their history and their wines. We just arrived 29 years too late...

So as a consolation prize – and on the road to Kazakhstan – we decided to visit the mountains of Karakol and the northern Issyk-Kul lake, traveling by minibus. As well as a two-day trek in the wilderness. And to top it all, we slept at night in a yurt in the mountains, making friends with some livestock on horseback along the way. Change of scenery guaranteed!



1500-hectares wineries in Kazakhstan... it's possible

It was while looking at a map that I realized how big Kazakhstan is! 4,5 times bigger than France. Luckily for us, the vineyards lie in the south of the country, halfway between Almaty and the Kyrgyz border. We didn't not have to go too far.

One feels immediately upon arriving in Almaty that the country is economically doing better than his Kyrgyz neighbour: the roads are (good), bars and trendy restaurants abound and it is not unusual to see 4x4 and other luxury cars in the city center. Oil helps, doesn't it?



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From the vineyard side we can not say that Kazakhstan is doing well though. In 1991, Gorbachev, still with the same determination as in the rest of the Soviet Union to stop popular alcoholism, had most of the vineyards in the country removed. Today there are only three formal wineries: **Bacchus**, **Issyk** and **Turguen**. However, it is possible to find some small private estates, between 2 and 3 hectares in size, better maintained and belonging to wealthy Kazakhs who produce wine for their own consumption. Some of these micro private estates even have French consultants managing their wine.

We were expected at **Turguen Winery**, a young estate rehabilitated in 2009 and where almost all of the 1,500 hectares of vines are not yet trellised, due to a lack of manpower. Here they produce 11 millions bottles per year with half the grapes coming from the vineyard. The other half is sold as table

grapes to supermarkets in the country.



Both **Turguen** wines will be bottled within a few weeks. So they are served to us in large carafes. Original! A very shy **white aligoté**, with hints of almond and quince, followed by a red blend of **Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Saperavi**⁽²⁾ with notes of blackcurrant and dirt, a little bit diluted. Both wines are sold €9 a bottle.



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We got a bit of a fright when we left the estate: the vineyard is located near a military zone where the daily shooting exercises are done with real bullets! But in order to leave the estate to continue our journey we had to go pass through a 2 km stretch of road right in the exercise area. A militant in position asked us to wait 20 minutes until the lunch break, at which time the exercises stop. We followed his advice to the letter, just to avoid a stray bullet ...

Extreme temperatures for the vines

Fortunately Globalink⁽³⁾, our main contact in Kazakhstan, kindly provided a chauffeured car for our travels in the vineyards of the region. Driving on country roads is not a luxury and can quickly become a national sport, as people drive fast and dangerously. As for finding the vineyards (which are not indicated, that would be too easy) it is a real full – scale hunting game – which reminded us of our beautiful troubles in Kenya!



After a 2-hour drive – due to a stop every 2km to ask our way – we arrived at **Issyk Winery**, 40 km (only) from Almaty. The estate, which dates back to 1932, produces 700 tonnes/year with its 200 hectares of vineyard. The winery is old and the equipment, dating back to the interwar period, have not been changed, which adds a certain charm to the place.

We visited the vineyard in 45 °C... It was stunning. Many grapes, still green, were already roasted by the sun.



This year is particularly dry and drip irrigation is not enough. Therefore the vines are flooded every two weeks. It is extreme but necessary, we were told, otherwise there is a risk of losing many vines. Despite this soils remain poor and dry and generate an incredible dust in the air. Low temperatures during the winter, it can get to as low as -35 °C in this part of the world, necessitates burrowing the vines for several months, as in China.



This gives fresh, rustic, light and very refreshing wines; which are well suited to this type of climate. As their "**Riesling Dry 2009**" (about €3.50), the highly aromatic "**Muscat Dry 2009**" (about €3.10), the "**Sweet White 2011**" (a blend of Chardonnay and Muscat sold at €3.10) or the "**Gold of Issyk 2010**", the iconic estate wine (a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot aged two years in old oak barrels and sold €6.20).



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It is true that communism hit Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan hard and we can still find well palpable traces of it. The vine has suffered greatly – where it has managed to survive.

And although these two countries will not be the great wine countries of tomorrow, it is with great pleasure and desire that we invite you to get there, for a week (or a month for the more adventurous explorers) : the hiking trails are breathtaking and numerous. The people are friendly, the food is delicious... and the ticket is not expensive at all! For the fans.

WineExplorers' cheers,
JBA

⁽¹⁾ The suffix -stan means a place or a people in Persian. Kazakhstan thus means the “land of the Kazakhs”, like Kyrgyzstan means the “land of the Kyrgyz”.

⁽²⁾ The Saperavi is a Georgian grape variety native from the Alazani valley in the mountains of the Greater Caucasus.

⁽³⁾ Globalink is DB Schenker’s transportation and logistics partner in Central Asia.

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