

The most dangerous wine in the world: Incredible story of how grapes from war-torn Syria are smuggled out

It has been called “the most dangerous wine in the world.”

But it is those who produce the Bargylus vintage, not those drinking it, who must tread carefully.

For its rich flavours have been cultivated in a vineyard in [war-torn Syria](#) where shells rain down and where lashes are handed out by the dozen for dealing in alcohol.

Vineyard owner Karim Saade reveals: “Every six or seven months we get some shelling.

“We haven’t had any major human casualties, thank god. The only damage was material, and material can be replaced.”

It is not just missiles that make the enterprise hazardous.

ISIS extremists who control increasing areas of the country allow no handling of alcohol under their strict Islamic law.

But as the harvest approaches, samples of the crop must be taken on a 125-mile taxi-ride to neighbouring Lebanon to test if they are at their prime.



Brave" Karim and Sandro Saade under the tree of Chateau Marsyas, their wine property

Packed in ice, shipments leave Latakia, in the north west of the country, sometimes crawling through a backlog of refugees desperately fleeing the country.

A wrong turn with a cab full of [wine-making grapes](#) could earn 100 lashes or worse at the hands of ISIS.

Karim, who runs the family business with his brother Sandro from a second vineyard in Lebanon, says: “We make as many journeys as we need with the samples, maybe five or six.”

Sandro adds: “There have been many times the taxi couldn’t get through, either the border was closed or due to security.

“We’ve had two bombs fall on the Chardonnay field, we don’t know where from – but definitely from a village where there are extremists.”

With the first vines planted in 2003, the £20-a-bottle vintage had built a solid reputation before [President Bashar al-Assad’s](#) attacks on street protests sparked civil war in 2011.



Dangerous drop: Bargylus white and red

It still produces 60,000 bottles a year.

Karim says: “We are passionate about the wine, even though the dangers have been made more complicated by the war.

“We have 30 families living off the vineyard, as well as seasonal workers. It’s their livelihood.

"Those people have been with us from the beginning. They are from different religions – Christians, Muslims, Alawites – working together.”

Karim cannot oversee the growing himself as he would face being kidnapped.

But he adds: “I think it is actually something good to come out of the country. We think of the estate as one big family.

"It’s an act of resistance, a symbol of perseverance. We are there, we’re going to stay.”

What does it taste like

Getty



Dangerous drop: But what does the wine taste like

From the shell-scarred hillsides of western Syria to the genteel streets of West London, the Chateau Bargylus wines are vintages with a rich history.

I was fortunate enough to sample the 2009 white and the 2008 red from the Saade family's isolated vineyards in the world's most strife-ridden nation.

Both bottles are on the wine list at the Meejana Lebanese restaurant, near Earl's Court Tube station.

They are rightly classed as two of the best wines on the extensive menu.

I preferred the syrupy, full-bodied red, which blended rich, dark fruit flavours from Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot grapes that lingered long on the palate.

It was a wine to be savoured, a testament to the skills of the winemakers.

The white, from the Chardonnay grape, was delicate and refreshing.

While war continues to destroy so many lives in Syria, it seems trite to be thinking about wine.

But the production of Chateau Bargylus provides a faint glimmer of hope of something positive for a country with an utterly bleak future.