



SOUL TO SOIL

Amid wars, illness and, most recently, an explosion near their office in Beirut, the Saadé brothers have managed to forge world-class wines from their vineyards in Lebanon and Syria

By Jeffrey T Iverson



Karim (left) and Sandro Saadé at their Château Marsyas estate in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley

What is the mark of a great vigneron? An innate sensitivity for plants? A mastery of the magic of fermentation? Ask one Bordeaux's most esteemed wine consultants – Stéphane Deroncourt, the terroir whisperer behind such estates as Château Prieuré-Lichine in Margaux and Francis Ford Coppola's Rubicon Estate Winery in Napa – and he'll point to something else: an unflinching capacity to weather storms of every kind. "Being a vigneron is a magnificently satisfying, but also masochistic profession, as you must bear a succession of daily fears and anxieties over myriad catastrophes – frost, hail, drought," he says. "Yet that's all part of the game, and a good winemaker feeds on that stress, channels it, to make his wines all the more exciting." And by this measure, today

Karim and Sandro Saadé have earned their places among the leading winemakers of the world.

For the past 18 years, in one of the most difficult and dangerous regions on the planet, the Saadé brothers have been managing not one but two estates – Château Marsyas in Lebanon, and Bargylus in Syria. Deroncourt has been advising them since the beginning, but never guessed how spirited the Saadés would prove themselves when the going got tough. "Karim and Sandro surprised me," he says, "but I think it has to do with the history of Lebanon. These are people who spent their entire youth knowing that at any moment it could all end – and that gives the Lebanese an energy and a resilience like I've rarely seen." Vintage after vintage, through crisis after crisis, the Saadés have made extraordinary wines, and, in so >



At work in the vines at Château Marsyas

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lost it all, but also that we didn’t give up, nor dwell on the past – we turned the page, and we looked towards the future. That shaped Sandro and me.”

Settling in Beirut, their father reorganised the family business around finance, tourism and real estate. But that passion for the earth was in his genes, and once the civil war was over and Karim and Sandro had come of age, Johnny presented his sons with a challenge – to renew the family’s agricultural tradition by planting vineyards. After several years of research, Karim and Sandro planted the first vines of their 12ha Bargylus estate on Syria’s coastal mountain range in 2003, soon followed by Château Marsyas’ 65 hectares in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley. Finally releasing their first bottles of Bargylus in 2006, they emblazoned them with an olive tree entwined with a grapevine, symbolising both the family’s past and future.

The Saadés had reason to believe their vines would flourish. After all, the region’s wines once enjoyed renown of biblical proportions. “Israel’s fame will be like the wine of Lebanon,” reads Hosea 14:7. The Romans even chose the Bekaa Valley to build their grand temple to Bacchus, god of wine, which still stands today in Baalbek. Moreover, the vineyards of Mount Bargylus (now known as Jebel al-Ansariyé) were cited by Pliny the Elder for producing wines exported across the ancient world.

For Stéphane Derenoncourt, it was that history which convinced him to accept an invitation from the Saadés in 2004. “From the moment I arrived at Bargylus my immediate thought was that this is a truly magnificent site.” A cool microclimate to ensure slow ripening, wonderfully structured clay soils with limestone and flint to add complexity meant that Derenoncourt “saw the potential to make wines with a strong identity – wines with an inimitable sense of a place”. And so the Frenchman began helping the Saadés to develop an haute-couture approach for each estate, adopting organic viticulture over pesticides, but also suppressing irrigation, planting at high density, and allowing natural grassing between the rows, all to force the vines’ roots to seek moisture and minerals in the limestone bedrock deep below. “If you want to create interesting wines,” he explains, “you need to impose a certain amount of suffering on the vines.”

One wonders if the same rule applies to humans. For ever since the 2006 vintage, when a war broke out with Israel just before their first harvest, cultivating the potential of Marsyas

doing, are helping fuel the belief in an eastern Mediterranean wine renaissance to come.

Karim and Sandro Saadé were born in the mid-1970s, scions of a Lebanese-Syrian family of Orthodox Christian origins, with mercantile ancestors hailing from Syria’s ancient port city of Latakia and across the Levant. Growing up in Beirut, their childhoods were both privileged and unpredictable. “A year after I was born, the Lebanese Civil War [1975-1990] broke out,” recalls Karim. “As kids, Sandro and I would go to school one day and the next we’d stay home because of a bombing raid. Several times we had to flee and live in France for a while, leaving Lebanon in the middle of the school year and continuing on in Paris. Our home in Beirut was struck several times, while we were inside. This was just our daily life.” The experiences undoubtedly marked the brothers, yet somehow they emerged from them untraumatised. How? Through storytelling.

The Saadés learned early on that the table was a place for sharing – sharing food, sharing wine (which for their Francophile, oenophile parents often meant a fine bottle of Saint-Émilion, Crozes-Hermitage or Sancerre) and sharing stories. “We often heard about the trials and tribulations of our ancestors,” recalls Karim. Men like Elias Saadé, their great-great-grandfather who revolutionised olive-tree cultivation in Syria, or their grandfather Rodolphe, an important Syrian landowner and agro-industrialist, or their father Johnny, who was there the day the Saadés’ lands and factories were confiscated under Syria’s union with Egypt (1958-1961). “These stories became part of our upbringing,” says Karim. “We learned where our family once lived, the land we once owned, how we

and Bargylus has consistently tested the limits of Karim and Sandro's savvy, creativity and perseverance. After first navigating several periods of Lebanese unrest, in 2011 the Syrian War began. Fighting came within 500 metres of Bargylus, with more than one vine lost to errant shells. Unable to even visit the estate now, the brothers faced a logistical nightmare. Yet they plodded on, managing their Syrian vineyard team by phone, and having samples from the various plots of syrah, cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc sent by taxi every summer 300 kilometres to Beirut for the brothers to taste and set the harvest date. Then on 4 August 2020, with the country already besieged by Covid-19, a neglected stockpile of ammonium nitrate in a portside warehouse exploded 600 metres from the Saadés office building in Beirut. The blast injured nearly everyone inside the building, including Sandro and Johnny, who was taken to intensive care with multiple fractures to his jaw and ribs.

"We considered ourselves lucky to have survived, as many others did not," says Sandro, who spent weeks on crutches. "Our one real source of worry was our father, who was still in the hospital when the harvest time came at Marsyas later that month." And so the maestros of crisis management improvised once again, transforming their father's hospital room into a harvest operation centre, tasting grape samples together and directing the vineyard team by phone. It's yet another example of the passion and perseverance of an uncommon family, whose cuvées are now served on Michelin-starred tables from Paris to Tokyo and lauded by critics. Today, *The World Atlas of Wine* calls Bargylus – where since 2003 Karim and Sandro's diverse, multiethnic, multireligious team has steadfastly, miraculously produced a vintage every year without fail – "the finest wine produced in the eastern Mediterranean". For a region with so many riches to share, it's a wine that symbolises something more than success. It is a wine of hope. bargylus.com, chateaumarsyas.com ♦

Where Wines Blossom

Lebanon has always been a fabulous melting pot of cultures, religions and influences, so it comes as no surprise that today the country's blossoming wine industry represents a colourful tapestry of grape varieties, influences and styles, from rich, opulent reds to complex whites to surprisingly fresh, high-altitude cuvées. Here are three estates not to be missed:

Chateau Musar is Lebanon's best-known winery and one of its most pioneering, making organic, unrefined, unfiltered wines, including deep, velvety reds and rich, creamy, stunning dry whites from the ancient obaideh and merwah grapes. chateaumusar.com

Ixsir is one of the country's fastest-rising stars, boasting some of the highest-altitude vineyards in the Northern hemisphere (1,800 metres), sustainably minded practices and acclaimed wines from a savoury mix of French and Lebanese grape varieties. ixsir.com

Domaine des Tourelles is among Lebanon's oldest and most acclaimed boutique wineries. Its Vieilles Vignes Cinsault cuvée, made from half-century-old cinsault, is now a cult wine, proving how superbly this grape expresses the Bekaa Valley terroir. domainedestourelles.com

SPECIAL PROMOTION

NOTEWORTHY

What to have. Where to go.



Smallbone's Modernist Collection – Inspired By The Best In Architectural Design. Created For Contemporary Living.

Taking its cue from the Modernist movement, Smallbone's latest collection marries scale and presence with expert craftsmanship. A modular design means that every element has unique, standalone impact, taking form and function beyond the traditional kitchen setting for the first time.

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Handcrafted by Smallbone's experienced makers in the heart of the British countryside, Modernist is a paean to the art of contemporary living. Every piece is designed with longevity in mind and with the principles of timeless architecture at its heart.

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