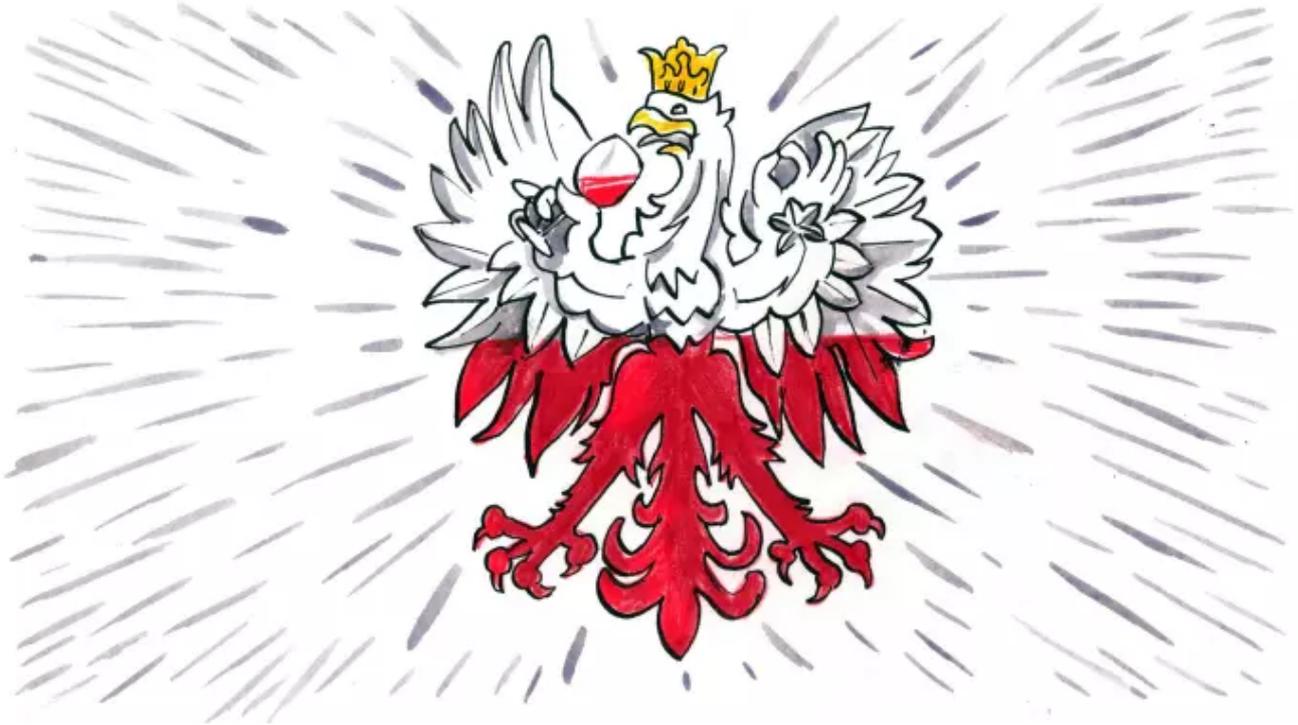


## Wine

## Poland's progress

'Poland has been developing a wine culture. Sales of still wine have increased by almost 60 per cent in the past 10 years'

**Jancis Robinson**



FEBRUARY 3, 2017 by: **Jancis Robinson**

For most of my adult life, the only European country I had never visited was Poland. Unlike most other Europeans, Poles neither made serious wine nor seemed to me to have much interest in drinking it. The only intersection of wine and Poland I was aware of was the 19th-century migration of vine-growing Silesians to the Barossa Valley in South Australia in response to religious persecution.

But recently and rapidly, Poland has been developing a wine culture. Sales of still wine there have increased by almost 60 per cent in the past 10 years. When I finally went there last autumn, I was told that Poland had more wine bars than Germany. My hosts were not perhaps the most objective. I was invited to Krakow (where, incidentally, possibly coincidentally, the wine-buying decisions for British Airways are now made) by Czas Vina, one of two glossy consumer wine magazines that are now published in Poland — the same number as in Britain, and one more than in France.

I'm sure I was far from the only first-time British visitor to Poland to be struck by how prosperous both town and country looked — more so than many parts of the UK. Presumably, wine drinking is a reflection of that prosperity, and of all those Ryanair miles travelled by Poles today.

While there I met members of the association of Polish women in wine, *Kobiety I Wino*, and have never come across a more active group of wine professionals. But, partly thanks to climate change, Poland is now producing as well as consuming wine. In the early Middle Ages, Poland was an active vine grower but when cooler temperatures set in, beer and spirits took over. Although some Silesians in the far south-west of what is now Poland (then Prussia) made wine for their own consumption, Poles were principally wine importers, particularly of Hungarian wines and especially of the famous dessert wine Tokaji.

From the 16th to the 18th century, Hungarian wine was regarded as more attractively sweet, spicy and robust than wimpy French wine and many a merchant, especially in Krakow in the south of the country, would import Tokaji in barrel, improving it, in their view, by ageing it (and heaven knows what else). Even today, a Polish saying has it that there is no wine above Hungarian wine.

With the partition of Poland at the end of the 18th century, trade with Hungary eased and French wine became so fashionable that some Polish aristocrats sold off their Tokaji, including wines that were then more than a century old. But the Warsaw merchant Fukier amassed the world's finest collection of Tokaji, with wines going back to 1606. Unfortunately Fukier, like so many, went bankrupt in the 1920s, and what remained of the collection was looted by Germans and then Russians so that the precise whereabouts of the bottles is a mystery even to my Tokaji-specialist wine historian colleague Hugh Johnson. Fukier today is a well known restaurant and location of some of the many wine events that take place in modern Poland.



I was a little surprised to spend my first few hours in Poland 150 metres below ground in a salt mine. But it is one of the jewels of the flourishing Krakow tourist industry, and is a Unesco world heritage site, no less. The vast church hollowed out of the salt mine is a popular location for weddings. My tour had a wine bent that included a first-class lunch served by top-quality waiting staff in a salty grotto after an aperitif of Philipponat's Clos des Goisses single-vineyard

has bottled its very own 2015, a blend of wines made by its extremely active members

champagne. The wines with lunch were provided, and personally presented, by Agnieszka Wyrobek-Rousseau, whose Wieliczka vineyards are nearby. Hers are the only Polish plantings to rely entirely on the European vinifera vine species. The Chardonnay

was entirely recognisable and a first-crop Merlot — reaching 12 per cent alcohol with no alcohol-boosting sugar added to the fermentation vat — even creditable.

Most of the vines planted in the harshly continental climate of Poland are hybrids such as Solaris, Rondo and especially Regent (regarded as usefully compatible with French oak ageing), which ripen early enough to escape the predations of a Polish winter. But the red burgundy grape Pinot Noir — plants from the Geisenheim wine research institute in Germany — is becoming popular. There are already more than 150 officially registered commercial vineyards with about 200 hectares of vines between them (the comparable figures for England and Wales in 2013 were 537 and 1,571 respectively).

But wine is now so popular with Poles and there are so many new plantings not yet in production that some observers reckon it will not be long before the Polish vignoble totals 1,000 hectares.

Wyrobek-Rousseau is one of only two trained oenologists in Poland but I also met Roman Mysliwiec, who planted vines as many as 35 years ago. He was one of the first dozen or so Polish vintners of the modern era and now advises many new entrants into the vinous fray.

Most plantings are in the south of the country but there is one vineyard on the northern coast where the relatively maritime climate helps extend the growing season. Polish vintners enjoyed their balmiest season yet in 2015 but there were some nasty shocks last year.

Even the most optimistic Polish wine lovers admit that probably only about a million consumers out of the country's population of more than 38 million are responsible for the boom. But they certainly could not be keener. The global educator, the Wine & Spirit Education Trust, works with four wine schools in Poland. I enjoyed my time there and, in the 16 Polish wines I had a chance to taste, saw great sincerity in combating the severity of the climate.

Polish cider, incidentally, is also enjoying a boom, since Russia, which once imported 70 per cent of Poland's apple production, no longer does. Drinking Polish cider is apparently seen as a patriotically anti-Russian activity, just like drinking Georgian wine.

## Remarkable Polish wines

- Palac Mierzecin Riesling 2015

*This did taste like Riesling.*

- Turnau Riesling 2015

*Off-dry, recognisably Riesling again. Large estate in the north-west part-owned by a well-known singer.*

- Srebrna Góra, Inspira Volcano 2013

*Fiery, Hungarian-inspired white made from the German hybrid Hibernial, most common in the Czech Republic.*

- Milosz Pinot Noir 2014

*Surprisingly burgundian, made by a journalist turned poet.*

- Wieliczka Merlot 2015

*Very respectable varietal from the only vinifera-only producer.*

- Golesz, Feromer 2011

*Not really a 2011, but a fortified blend of 2009 and 2013!*

*Tasting notes on [JancisRobinson.com](http://www.jancisrobinson.com/) (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/>)*

*Illustration by Graham Roumieu*

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