

MADE IN HOLLAND





When one thinks of The Netherlands, the first thought is not wine. Somewhere after windmills, tulips, clogs, cheese and Anne Frank, *jenever* (Dutch gin) might appear. Or another more popular alcoholic beverage, beer. Yet Dutch winemaking is on the rise, and, it turns out, even has a long history.

#### Dutch winegrowing throughout the ages

It is likely that the Romans were the first to grow grapes in the country. Later on, the will of Queen Gerberga listed, among other things, a vineyard. Little is known about this Saxon queen whose territory included what is now Maastricht, but her will, dating from 968 AD, mentions leaving her grape fields to one of her children; it is the first known reference to Dutch winemaking. In the 14th and 15th centuries, Dutch winegrowing reached its peak, especially in the Maas and Geul Valleys. At the time, the climate was more akin to that of the Mediterranean. Things started to change around the middle of the 16th century, however, when temperatures began to drop during the Little Ice Age, and beer became an even more popular drink. These and other factors, such as the marked increase in wine trade with Bordeaux, ultimately led to the end of winemaking in The Netherlands by 1800. It wasn't until 1967 that the first vines were planted again in Maastricht, at the *Slavante* winery, which still exists today. In the 1970s, when more vineyards were planted in the provinces of Limburg and North Brabant, winemaking slowly started to return to the country.

#### Growing grapes in a Dutch 'terroir'

Even though the Dutch climate is considerably more damp and less sunny than in the famous wine regions of France and Italy, growing good wine grapes is possible. In the 70s and 80s, researchers in Germany, Austria, Hungary and Switzerland began to develop grape varieties that were more resistant to mold and mildew, needed fewer hours of sunshine and ripened earlier. In short, grapes that were perfect for the Dutch climate. When these grapes became available to the Dutch market in the late 90s, even more vineyards started to pop up around the country. Currently, there are roughly 450 wineries in The Netherlands. Of the approximately two hundred commercial wineries, nearly all are located in the eastern and southern parts of the country, in the provinces of Gelderland and Limburg respectively, but there are wineries as far north

# High wine in a low country

as Groningen and even on the island of Texel. The clustering of vineyards has as much to do with the slightly milder climate in those parts of the country as it does with the soil. Gelderland has loess, a fine, silt-based soil, and Limburg has marl, a calcareous, clay-based soil, both of which are favorable for growing grapes.

The future of winemaking in The Netherlands may only get better. Rick van Denderen, owner of *Wijnen van Holland* (Wines of Holland), an online shop specializing in Dutch wines, points out that with climate change,

the current sweet spot of grape growing (now the Bordeaux region of France) is moving northward: "As global temperatures warm, that area shifts up. It could be interesting for winemaking in The Netherlands."

For now, the cooler climate means that most of the wine produced in the country is white. "White grapes do better in a Dutch climate," said van Denderen. Traditional white grapes, such as Riesling and Pinot Gris are grown in the south, as are a number of newer grapes including Johanniter and Solaris. There are also new, more hearty varieties of red grapes grown as well, such as Regent and Rondo.

#### Winemakers, and learning their craft

In a country that consumes 71.4 liters of beer per person compared to 20.3 liters of wine, it takes a special personality to get into the wine business. According to van Denderen, there are three types of financially viable winemakers in the country. There are those who couldn't make a living with more common crops such as potatoes, so they tried grapes. Others got into the business more intentionally, with some of them offering extra services to supplement their income.

These include wine tours, tastings and even camping facilities. *Wijngaard De Linie*, an award-winning winery located in Made in the province of North Brabant, lets you pick and press your own grapes, for example. The third type of winemaker is the passionate hobbyist turned professional. One of them is Tycho Vermeulen, a researcher at Wageningen University. He started *Haagse Stadswijngaard* (The Hague City Vineyard) in 2013 as a crowdfunding project with the idea of taking a plot of derelict land in the middle of the city and turning it into a little piece of France where anyone interested could learn to make their own wine. The vineyard, which was planted in 2014, produced its first two hundred liters of wine last year. Two-thirds went to the crowdfunders (who each rented a plot of land with ten plants), a box went to the mayor, Jozijs van Aartsen, and the

rest was sampled during a tasting held on the 14th of April. As of this year, *Haagse Stadswijngaard* hopes to produce between five hundred and six hundred liters of wine annually. Vermeulen recently worked with the city of Amsterdam to help open a similar vineyard there. No Chateau was planted late this spring, and the first vintage is expected in 2018.

Those who take their craft seriously turn to the knowledge base of more traditional winemaking countries. Arjan de Jong, owner of Wines and Whiskeys, a speciality liquor store in Delft, sees a lot of Dutch winemakers going to France to learn the craft: "Many of them are trying to emulate the French wine styles here," he said. On the other hand, winemakers who don't want to travel can have the knowledge

nice for a lunch out of doors. Not industrial. Very frank." It isn't any wonder that *De Colonjes* has managed to win many international gold medals. A few months after the tasting, Robinson wrote on her website: "I had the most modest of hopes for them [the wines] but the more I tasted the more surprised and delighted I was."

Ultimately, however, due to the high costs of land and labor, Dutch wine cannot compete with more established wine countries when it comes to price. "Good white wine from The Netherlands sells for 10 to 12 euros per bottle, while a similar quality from France sells for 6 to 7 euros," said van Denderen. A smaller production means that Dutch wine makes for great gifts and not so much for bulk orders. "Sometimes



come to them in the form of a flying winemaker. These experts from traditional winemaking countries such as France come to The Netherlands to share their knowledge of the craft and assist in cultivation and production. "Many Dutch wineries employ a flying winemaker, either for their initial setup or throughout the year," said van Denderen.

### Quality, price and production

Contrary to popular belief, wine produced in The Netherlands can be very good. Dutch wine has even been praised by renowned British wine critic Jancis Robinson. In 2010, she took part in what she called "the most surprising tasting" of her life. Robinson sampled sixteen Dutch wines for iPad wine magazine, *By the Grape*. One of the wines she tasted was the 2008 Regent from *Wijnhoeve De Colonjes*. The organic winery boasts thirteen hectares of grapes and is located in Groesbeek in the province of Gelderland. Groesbeek is one of the largest wine growing villages. Robinson's notes on the wine, published in the magazine read: "Unoaked. Respectable crimson. Clean, fresh, rather Cabernet Franc-like nose. Sweet and light on the front palate. Lots of acidity. Very clean,

companies request three hundred bottles of a Dutch wine for their Christmas packages, and we have to tell them it's not possible. The winery doesn't produce that in year," said de Jong.

### Eager to try Dutch wine?

Those interested in sampling Dutch wines, will have to plan a trip to The Netherlands as the country does not export any wine as of yet. And there is no better time to plan your trip than during the last weekend of September when the wine village of Groesbeek holds its annual Dutch wine festival, *De Nederlandse Wijnfeesten*, this year from the 23rd to the 25th. Featuring wine and food markets and the chance to visit vineyards and take part in variety of interesting workshops, it is an event that has been attracting more and more visitors since its start in 2007. It may be interesting to note that some KLM flights serve wine from the Apostelhoeve in Maastricht and *De Kleine Schorre* in Dreischor to its business class passengers, so you might get a taste of Dutch wine before you even set foot in the country! 🍷

Molly Quell



