

AZERBAIJANI GRAPES: PAST AND PRESENT

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WHITE SHANI
Local Absheron
variety

AZERBAIJAN IS AN ANCIENT LAND OF VITICULTURE. ITS NATURE AND CLIMATE ARE FAVORABLE FOR GROWING DIFFERENT VARIETIES OF GRAPES. THE OLDEST, LONG-STORED, SUGARY AND HIGH-YIELDING VARIETIES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CULTIVATED IN OUR COUNTRY.

Azerbaijani grapes and products made of them, such as grape juices which make you physically vigorous and sherbets with their scent of flowers that are also a source of high spirits, have been served for holiday feasts since ancient times.

Azerbaijan's natural conditions are conducive to growing grapes. Even primitive man, in addition to hunting and fishing, gathered wild-growing berries and fruit, including grapes. **According to a research by prominent Russian botanist N. Vavilov, the Caucasus, Azerbaijan**

in particular, is considered one of the centers of plants, including grapes.

According to Nizami's works, when the troops of Alexander the Great invaded Azerbaijan and besieged Barda, according to an arrangement with local ruler Nushaba, part of the local population's tribute was paid in grapes.

Wine is also mentioned on the lists of products exacted in tax from the people of north-western Media. In 714 B.C., during the arrival of Sargon II, the Mannaeans greeted his warriors with flour and wine.

Archeological excavations are an effective tool for studying the socio-economic background of Azerbaijani people, including the history of viticulture. There is extensive archeological information suggesting that the peoples inhabiting the territory of present-day Azerbaijan had developed viticulture. Some buried grape clusters have reached us from the depth of centuries in a dry and semi-decomposed condition. Quite a few of the surviving grapes had been placed in jugs and thus preserved their form and size. In 1962, an archeological excavation



of a 6-5th century B.C. historical site, Shomutepe near Agstafa discovered remains of different plants, including grape seeds. Following the discovery, **scientists proved that the history of viticulture in Azerbaijan is at least 7 millennia long.** The grape seeds, stone tools used in wine-making and other items discovered in excavations around Uzerliktepe near Agdam, in Khanlar District and in Nakhchivan are evidence of the role viticulture played in the lives of local tribes in the bronze age. The seeds discovered in Uzerliktepe are over 3500 years old

and, according to specialists, belong to grapes for table use. The seeds are of different sizes, the biggest being 6.5 mm long. Excavations near the Ganjachay river have revealed that the local population was engaged in horticulture and viticulture in the bronze age.

Excavation of a late bronze age burial mound has discovered pottery jars. A chemical analysis of their petrified content revealed that it is a wine sediment which also contains grape seeds. Along with late bronze age attire, arms and crockery, the excavation of the Yaloylutepe sep-

ulcher in Khanlar District discovered food, vessels for the storage of wine and remains of grape seeds. Vessels with wine were placed near a deceased person during funeral rituals.

In addition to the remains of grapes and jugs, the excavations also discovered the instruments used in horticulture (hoes, knives, pressing stones, clippers, chopping knives, etc.), crockery (vessels, jugs, wineglasses, bowls, etc.). Pressing stones were found buried deep underground in the Givrag and Shakhtahti-Garabaglar villages, Galachig and Kultepe settlements



DERBENDI
Local Absheron
variety
of Azerbaijan



DERBENDI
Local Absheron
variety
of Azerbaijan



NAIL
This variety was
obtained by the
author through
breeding (1988)



BAYANSHIRE
Local Azerbaijan
variety spread in
foothill areas

of Sharur District of Nakhchivan. There is a deep hollow in the middle and a furrow on the stones through which cleared wine would pour. This points to the development of viticulture in the 2nd millennium B.C. The excavation in the Borsunlu village of Terter District in 1982 revealed a large earthenware boiler with a hole at the bottom. It has been proven that the boiler was used for pressing grapes in the late 2nd millennium B.C.

In a 5th century B.C. research, Herodotus wrote: “The abundance and quality of local grapes are known even in Iran, Babylon and Greece.” Roman historian Pliny the Elder, admiring the wealth and horticulture on the territory of present-day Azerbai-



jan, said: “... I have never eaten such tasty grapes before. This people can till the ground better than Egyptians.”

Describing the farming activity of ancient Azerbaijan population, Strabo highlighted the role of viticulture. “Vineyards there (Caucasian Albania) are not covered. Vine ends are cut every five years, new plantations produce crops on the second year, while old vineyards yield so much produce that much of it stays unharvested.”

Prominent 14-15th century Azerbaijani geographer and historian Abdurrashid Bakuvi described the development of viticulture in and around Baku. Merchants and travelers would take the best varieties of grapes to distant countries. **Geog-**

rapher and traveler Adam Olearius wrote that first grape clusters were brought to Astrakhan from Shirvan. Besides, in his notes about Azerbaijan he also pointed to the presence of around 600 varieties here.

The researches on viticulture in Azerbaijan suggest that this area was mainly developed in two directions. Until the first half of the 19th century it was mainly part of subsistence farming, but when Azerbaijan joined the Russian market, the demand dramatically increased, bolstering further development of viticulture. The issue of raising processing levels emerged. Industrial wine-making began developing in the 1860-70s.

Azerbaijan’s viticulturists developed many valuable varieties each



GAMASHARA
Local Jalilabad
variety of
Azerbaijan



GANJA PINK
Local Ganja
variety of
Azerbaijan



BENDI
Local
Nakhchivan
variety of
Azerbaijan



MEDRESE
Local Upper
Shirvan variety of
Azerbaijan

of which was adapted to the soil and climate conditions in different parts of the country. These varieties were named for different qualities: color (Black, White, Yellow, Sarigilya, Violet, Gek Gezendan, Karaserme, etc.), quality, taste, aroma (Gilabi, Kishmishi, Shekeri, Tembei, Shirei, Kerimgandi), appearance and size of berries (Gushuren, Misgali, Tulku-guyrugu, Deveguzu, Tuleguzu, Kesimemesi-inekemdzei, Galinbarmagi-khatinbarmagi), thickness of peel (Dash uzum, Galingabig, Nazikgabig), seed size and shape of the cluster (Saplalurmaz, Khachabash, Bendi, Teberze). The names of some varieties come from places, such as Beylagani, Tabrizi, Shabrani, Derbendi, Ordubadi, Shirvanshahi, Tatli, Merendi, Medrese, Shakhtakhti, etc. Some varieties made their breeders famous: Khalili, Hussein, Askeri, Sakina Khanum, Mukhtari, Agadai, Melei, etc. Certain imported varieties known by the name of their "historic homeland" have caught on in Azerbaijan. For example, during the Arab invasion into Central Asia in the 7-9th centuries, grapes which were subsequently grown around Ta'if were imported. This variety was brought to Azerbaijan from Central Asia and became known as Taifi.

Azerbaijan's grape-growers have learned how to adapt imported varieties to the local climate. For instance, Rkatsiteli and Tavkveri were imported from Georgia, Muska, Berdo and Pino from Crimea. In the mid-19th century, Cabernet, Isabella, Riesling, Aliquot were imported from Europe. These varieties yield a good harvest. In turn, **some valuable sorts were exported to Central Asia, Crimea, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, etc.** Dark yellow, amber-colored Khazar, Kishmishi are the cure for many diseases,

strengthen the tone of the heart and the body. Another Nakhchivan variety, Shafei, is a medicine in the truest sense of the word: it strengthens the body, helps in anemia and poor eyesight. Over 100 varieties of grapes were grown in Nakhchivan.

The Absheron Peninsula is a traditional center of viticulture. There are often trailing vines here. In this position grapes are prone to disease and survive largely thanks to the Khazri, a wind blowing from the Caspian Sea.

Over 50 varieties of grapes grow in Absheron, but the main ones are Ag Shani, Gara Shani, Sarygilya, Khatyni, Pishraz, Geybadam, Rish Baba, Halbesar, Galinbarmagi, Kechiemdzei, Gizil uzum, Kishmishi, Movyuchu, Derbendi, Salyani, Zabrat. Unlike other regions, many of the Absheron grape varieties have been preserved because there were no commercial vineyards here. Currently, all these varieties can be found in people's backyards. By the degree of sugar content, Shani is superior to all other varieties. This is primarily due to soil and climatic conditions of Absheron, and also a set of trace elements in the «golden sand» endemic to the region.

Our country has all conditions for the production of wines that can compete with well-known brands. There are sayings by famous travelers, scientists and statesmen on Azerbaijani wine. For example, renowned Russian writer Maxim Gorky, during a visit to Baku in 1936, tasted Azerbaijani wine and made no secret of his admiration. He and even proposed a toast "To the health of the people drinking the sparkling sun". Very aptly put, isn't it! After all, it is thanks to the sunlight and heat that grapes of such an exquisite taste ripen. There are many

regions in Azerbaijan where there is enough sunlight and heat. Even the varieties with the lowest sugar content are suitable for making wines and grape juices.

Only a handful of the known 20,000 varieties are considered curative. The most curative is Tabrizi, which serves as an indispensable attribute of a festive table. Not many varieties of grapes can be compared with Azerbaijan's Shirvanshahi. The Kurdamir wine made of this variety is ranked among most recognized wines of the world.

Unfortunately, due to the insufficient coverage of Azerbaijan's viticulture in the media, some grape varieties were misappropriated by our ungrateful neighbors. Nakhchivan's Khachabashi was shamelessly renamed into Ararati (allegedly because Khachbash means two-headed in Armenian). Agdam's Kechiembzhei has become Isaptuk, while Nakhchivan's Misgali and Kharji turned into Mslugali and Voskehat. 🌞

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BLACK SHANI
Local Absheron variety of Azerbaijan



ARNA-GRNA
Local Nakhchivan variety of Azerbaijan



ZEYNABI
Local Karabakh variety of Azerbaijan



MISGALI
Local Azerbaijani variety



KHINDOGNI
Local Karabakh variety of Azerbaijan



AGDAM KECHIEMDZHEI
Local variety of Agdam District of Azerbaijan



TEBRIZI
One of Azerbaijan's best varieties



MARANDI
Local variety of Agdam and Shamakhi Districts of Azerbaijan