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DRINK UP: *Armenian wines make their debut*

New wines are constantly popping up in stores. Now local wine drinkers can add Armenian wines to the mix, thanks to Ararat Import Export LLC, formed by Edgar Vardanian, a dancer in Carolina Ballet in Raleigh, and his partners, former dancer Vlad Burakov and importer Arnie Slutsky.



Michael Hastings

Vardanian, 29, began importing brandy and wine from his native Armenia last year in hopes of having a second career

when it comes time to hang up his dancing shoes.

Most of his imports are wines made from native Armenian grapes rarely seen in this country. His newest wine is made from pomegranates, which until recently have not been very popular in the United States. "In Armenia, pomegranates grow everywhere. We use pomegranates in some form in almost everything. I've been drinking the juice since I was this high," Vardanian said, indicating a height of about 2 feet.

The pomegranate fruit itself is notoriously difficult to eat because it has hundreds of seeds. In Armenia, pomegranates also are made into a sauce for fish and a syrup used in everything from cakes to cocktails.

Potential health benefits

Vardanian decided to import pomegranate wine because trendy U.S. chefs recently have been incorporating the juice and syrup in all kinds of dishes. Also, pomegranates have been reported to have potential health benefits, because of their cancer-fighting antioxidants — more than that in red-wine grapes.

The pomegranate wine, available in Winston-Salem at Whole Foods Market, is a semisweet wine. Served chilled, it tastes like a blend of strawberry and red-grape juices. It's a bit alcoholic at first, but the fruity flavor increases in appeal upon subsequent sips. This can be a refreshing wine for summer, not unlike an off-dry rose or blush wine, such as white zinfandel.

Whole Foods also is carrying a couple of other Ararat red wines. The 1991 areni, a dry red, has lots of white pepper and restrained berry fruit. Overall, it's reminiscent of a lighter Cotes du Rhone wine.

Vernashen is like a cross between the pomegranate and areni wines. Made from the areni grape, it has a peppery nose and berry fruit, but only a touch a sweetness. All of the wines retail for about \$10.

Thriving for centuries

Armenia's modern wine industry began in 1870, but wine grapes have thrived there for centuries.

Vardanian named his company for Armenia's Mount Ararat. It is here, according to the Bible, that Noah's Ark came to rest after the flood, at which time "Noah began to be an husbandman and he planted a vineyard." (Genesis 9:20).

Vardanian said that because Armenian wines are mostly imported through the West Coast and tend to be a bit expensive once they reach Eastern cities, he's hoping to fill a void in the market. So far, he's encouraged. In fact, he's working harder than he planned. "I didn't expect everybody to be calling me, saying, 'Bring me some more,'" he said.

He says he hopes that he'll soon be able to hire a delivery person, or contract with a distributor to help get his wines into stores.

Though some of Vardanian's colleagues dance into their 40s, he knows that his dancing days are limited. He also recently became engaged, and he's thinking about the difficulty of reconciling the performing life with that of a family. "I'm getting to the age, it's time to think of kids," he said. "With dancing, it's hard. I can barely take care of my dogs right now."

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