

KOSOVO¹ Vineyard and Wine sector overview

June 2023
Writer: Frédéric JULIA



I. Evidence of Ancient Viticulture in Kosovo

Archaeological evidence indicates that viticulture in Kosovo dates back over 2,000 years, with the earliest signs of vine cultivation found in the Dukagjini Valley, a prominent wine-producing region in the southwestern part of the country. One of the most significant discoveries supporting this history is the unearthing of two stone tablets from the 2nd century BCE in the village of Reti, within the Rahovec Municipality. These artefacts are engraved with texts referencing viticulture, as well as carvings of vine leaves and grape clusters.

Further evidence is located at the Great Helvetic Tekke in Rahovec, where tombstones dating to the 30s of the 2nd century CE contain Latin inscriptions and engraved depictions of grapevines and bunches of grapes. Such findings confirm that grapevine cultivation and wine production were present in Kosovo during antiquity and likely practiced by the Illyrians, followed by Roman and Hellenistic cultural influences.

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

Chart 1: Tombstone from the 2nd century BCE found in Rahovec, engraved with grapevine motifs and grape clusters.



Historical Challenges and Evolution of Kosovo's Viticulture

Despite its ancient roots, the viticulture and wine industry in Kosovo has faced multiple historical setbacks. The most prolonged interruption occurred during the Ottoman period, when Kosovo, like Albania, was part of the Islamic Ottoman Empire for approximately 500 years. Under Islamic rule, the cultivation of grapes and wine production were significantly restricted due to religious prohibitions, with viticulture largely confined to Christian religious institutions such as monasteries and churches (Kabashi, 2016).

A second major disruption came with the Phylloxera epidemic, which affected Kosovo between 1913 and 1923, between the First and Second World Wars. The Phylloxera pest devastated vineyards across the region, leading to widespread uprooting and necessitating the replanting of vineyards using grafted vines resistant to the pest.

The instability caused by the Balkan Wars further hindered the consistent development of the viticultural sector. Nevertheless, modern viticulture in Kosovo began to take root with the establishment of regenerated vineyards in Rahovec in 1932. This was followed by significant vineyard development in Landovica (near Prizren) in 1948. The first modern wine cellars were constructed in both Landovica and Rahovec in 1952, with the Rahovec Wine Cellar becoming fully operational by 1953. Intensive expansion of wine cellar infrastructure continued through 1956–1957.

Between 1970 and 1989, Kosovo's viticultural sector experienced rapid growth, marked by a steady annual increase in vineyard area and grape production. By 1998, Kosovo boasted approximately 9,000 hectares of vineyards, with wine production facilities established in key regions including Rahovec, Suhareka (Theranda), Malisheva, Gjakova, Prizren, and Istog. During this period, Kosovar wine was exported to various international markets, signaling a brief but notable integration into the global wine industry.

II. Vineyard regions

The modern industrialization of Kosovo's wine sector began in the 1970s with the establishment of large, state-owned enterprises. At its height, vineyard coverage exceeded 9,000 hectares, divided between private and public ownership and primarily located in the southern and western regions of the country. During this period, four major state-owned wine production facilities dominated the sector, with a substantial proportion of output destined for export. By 1989, exports from the Rahovec production facilities alone reached 40 million liters annually, with Germany as a key market. Prior to the 1999 war for independence, Kosovo's total wine processing capacity was approximately 112 million liters per year.

As of 2019, Kosovo reported a total of 3,298 hectares under vine cultivation, consisting of approximately 75% wine grape varieties and 25% table grape varieties. Of the wine grapes, red varieties accounted for 66%, while white varieties represented 34%. These vineyards are concentrated primarily in two viticultural regions: **South Dukagjini and North Dukagjini**.

South Dukagjini Region

South Dukagjini is Kosovo's dominant viticultural zone, comprising roughly 95% of the country's vineyard area. Located in the southwest, it encompasses the municipalities of Gjakova, Rahovec, Prizren, and Suhareka. This region is subdivided into five sub-regions:

- **Rahovec:** ~2,456 ha (dominant sub-region)
- **Suhareka:** ~575 ha
- **Prizren:** ~198 ha
- **Gjakova:** ~77 ha
- **Malisheva:** ~65 ha

The region is enclosed by several mountain ranges, including the Grebnička (733 m) to the north, Drenica (1,025 m) and Crnoljevo (1,177 m) to the northeast, Žar (1,694 m) and Ošljak (2,212 m) to the southeast, and Koritnik (2,393 m) to the south. These natural barriers contribute to diverse mesoclimates favorable to grape cultivation.

North Dukagjini Region

The North Dukagjini region comprises around 5% of the country's total vineyard area and spans the municipalities of Istog, Peja, and Klina in the northwest.

Chart 2: Map of South and North Dukagjini Wine Regions

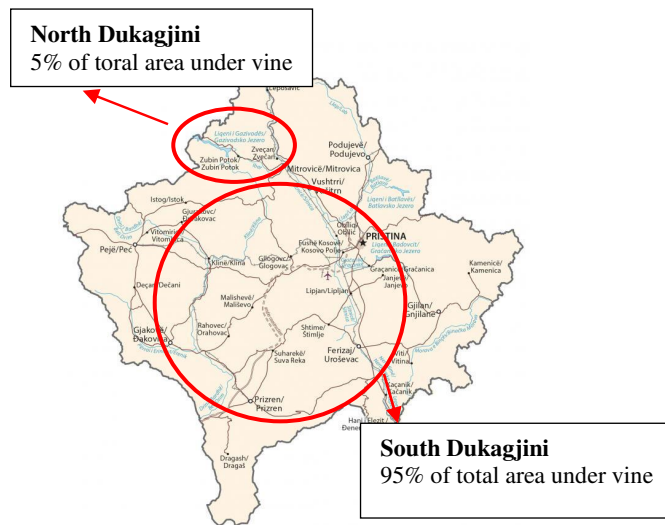
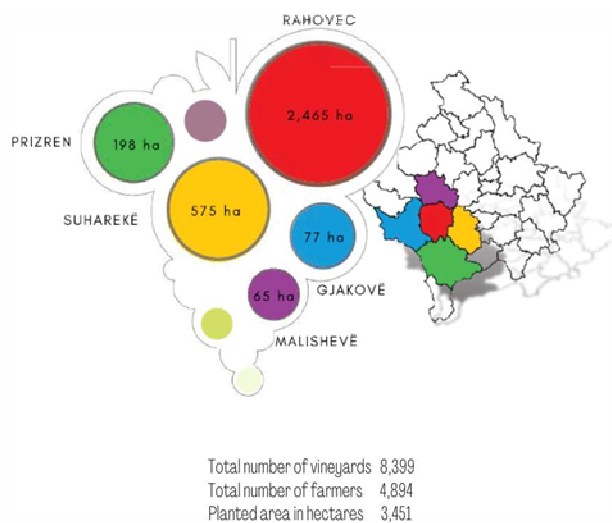


Chart 3: Distribution of Vineyard Area in South Dukagjini



III. Soil and Terroir

The dominant soil types in Kosovo's viticultural zones are **Vertisols** (clay-rich soils with high fertility) and **Fluvisols** (alluvial soils), indicating the geological history of the area, which was once covered by the ancient Tethys Sea. These soils are generally fertile and support vigorous vine growth.

Vineyards are typically situated at elevations between 300 and 600 meters above sea level, on moderately steep to gently sloping terrain, further enhancing grape quality through optimal sunlight exposure and natural drainage.

Chart 4: Terraced Vineyards in Rahovec



IV. Climatic Conditions

Kosovo experiences a **Mediterranean-continental climate**, particularly in key wine-producing areas such as Rahovec. Climatic parameters include:

- **Annual precipitation:** ~765 mm
- **Average annual temperature:** +11.8 °C
- **Warmest month (July):** up to +38.5 °C
- **Coldest month (February):** down to -14.5 °C

Prevailing winds originate from the west (~50% of the time), and the **Drini i Bardhë** River traverses the region, moderating temperatures and contributing to the development of localized microclimates.

V. Grape Varieties and Production

Kosovo's terroir is particularly well-suited to red grape cultivation. In 2020, red wine grape varieties occupied 1,653 ha (48.1%), followed by white wine grapes at 872 ha (25.4%) and table grapes at 911 ha (26.5%).

While international varieties are increasingly planted, the most widely cultivated variety remains **Vranac (Vranaç)**, covering over 500 ha.

Chart 5: Vranac Grape Variety – Morphology and Characteristics



Common Red Wine Varieties:

- Vranac (Vranaç)
- Gamay (Game)
- Dibrak (Prokupac)
- Cabernet Sauvignon
- Merlot
- Pinot Noir
- Syrah
- Blaufränkisch (Francovka)
- Kallmet

Common White Wine Varieties:

- Smederevka (Dimjat)
- Italian Riesling
- Rhine Riesling
- Chardonnay

VI. Challenges in Nursery and Planting Material Supply

According to the **SWG-RRD Report on the Viticulture and Wine Sector in the Western Balkans**, the viticulture sector in Kosovo remains dependent on imported agricultural inputs, including fertilizers, pesticides, trellising materials (concrete posts, wires), and enological additives.

The domestic production of grapevine seedlings is severely limited. Only two nurseries operate in the Rahovec and Suhareka regions, with only one licensed by the Ministry of Agriculture. This nursery has a capacity of 25,000–30,000 seedlings per year. However, facilities are outdated and lack modern grafting, stratification, and storage infrastructure. Furthermore, there is a notable lack of training in contemporary seedling production techniques.

Price comparisons highlight competitive disadvantages for domestic producers:

- **Domestic seedlings:** €0.60–1.00 per unit
- **Imported (neighboring countries):** €0.40–0.60 per unit
- **Imported (EU countries):** €0.90–1.50 per unit

The absence of stringent quality control measures for imported planting material has facilitated the entry of uncertified and potentially low-quality seedlings into the local market, often sold by unauthorized vendors, posing phytosanitary and genetic risks to domestic production.

VII. Historical and Contemporary Development of the Wine

Industry in Kosovo

The foundation of industrial wine production in Kosovo began in **1953** with the establishment of *Kosova Vera*, the first wine cooperative specializing in the production of wine and spirits. This marked the formal inception of organized viticulture in the region. In response to increasing demand and favorable agro-climatic conditions, the Yugoslav government expanded production capabilities in **Rahovec** during the 1970s.

Between **1973 and 1974**, a second cooperative, *Bernjaka 1*, was established, focusing on **white wine production**. This was followed in **1978** by the creation of *Bernjaka 2*, specializing in **red wine production**. These three cooperatives were eventually consolidated under the state-owned enterprise **NBI Rahoveci** (Nova Bujqësia Industriale Rahoveci).

Prior to the establishment of NBI Rahoveci, an extensive agro-environmental assessment was conducted by leading viticultural experts from Germany and the former Yugoslavia. This study included an evaluation of local climatic conditions and edaphic (soil) properties, ultimately selecting **limestone-rich areas** with optimal microclimates for grape cultivation. At its peak, **NBI Rahoveci** managed **1,200 hectares of vineyards**, employed over **1,000 workers**, and procured up to **20 million kilograms of grapes annually** from surrounding rural communities (Berisha, 2016). The facility had an estimated **production capacity of 50 million liters per year**, with the majority of the output intended for **export markets**. NBI Rahoveci was one of seven major state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Kosovo at the time.

Following the privatization process initiated in **2006**, NBI Rahoveci was divided into two entities:

- **LLC Stone Castle Vineyards and Winery**, acquired by the **Gecaj family**
- **LLC Bodrumi i Vjetër**, acquired by the **Haxhijaha family**

These two entities remain among the largest players in the Kosovar wine industry today.

Current Structure of the Wine Sector in Kosovo

The **post-privatization wine industry** in Kosovo is entirely **privately owned**, comprising both **large-scale producers** and a growing number of **small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs)**.

Key players include:

- **LLC Stone Castle Vineyards & Winery**
- **LLC Bodrumi i Vjetër**
- **LLC Suhareka Verari**
- **Agrokosova**
- **Illyrian**

As of **2021**, **36 wineries** were officially registered in Kosovo. Of these, **20 are members** of the newly established **Kosovo Wine Association**, signaling a trend toward sectoral organization and collective representation.

Wine Export Trends and Market Distribution

According to the *SWG-RRD Report on the Viticulture and Wine Sector in the Western Balkans*, **Kosovo exported wine to 31 countries** between 2013 and 2018. The major destination markets, along with respective volumes, include:

Country	Export Volume (Liters)
Croatia	14,216,165
Serbia	12,892,127
Albania	5,934,046
Slovenia	1,731,604
Montenegro	1,416,916
Switzerland	1,120,394
North Macedonia	1,114,425
Czech Republic	1,126

While a significant portion of exported wine is still sold in **bulk at low prices**, recent years have seen a **gradual shift towards bottled wine exports**, which may offer greater added value and brand recognition for Kosovar wines on international markets.

Sectoral Constraints and Input Dependencies

The development of Kosovo's wine industry continues to face structural and logistical challenges, particularly in terms of **supply chain constraints**. There is a **lack of a domestic supply base** for essential oenological and agricultural inputs, such as:

- Glass bottles
- Corks
- Agricultural chemicals (e.g., pesticides, fungicides)
- Fertilizers
- Wine-processing additives
-

As a result, the industry is heavily reliant on **imported goods**, which contribute significantly to production costs. According to Geca (2016), **imported materials can represent up to 55% of the final price of a bottle of wine**, substantially affecting profitability and competitiveness.

VIII. Legal and Regulatory Framework for Wine Production in Kosovo

Kosovo has progressively developed its legal framework for viticulture and wine production, beginning with the adoption of **Law No. 02/L-8 on Wines** in **2005**. This foundational legislation—commonly referred to as the **Wine Law**—established the initial legal standards governing the production, processing, and marketing of wine products in the country. In **2011**, the law was amended and supplemented through **Law No. 04/L-019**, which introduced adjustments to better align Kosovo's legal framework with evolving sectoral needs and practices.

This legislative corpus is **partially harmonized** with the **European Union (EU) wine acquis**, particularly in areas concerning product classification, labeling, geographical indications, and quality control. However, full alignment with the EU regulatory framework remains a work in progress.

In recognition of recent developments in EU regulations and to further harmonize national legislation with **Regulation (EU) No. 1308/2013** and associated delegated acts, a **new draft Law on Wine** was prepared during **2020–2021**. This draft law incorporates changes related to production standards, traceability, certification, and market organization, and is currently **awaiting formal adoption**.

Digitalization and Vineyard Register System

As part of its institutional reforms, Kosovo has established a **National Vineyard Register**, a key instrument for sectoral monitoring, compliance, and traceability. This register includes **comprehensive digital records of vineyards** across **18 municipalities** where grape cultivation is currently practiced.

The system provides a digital interface for **grape producers and wine processors** to:

- Declare annual grape and wine production
- Register plot-specific data (area, varieties, ownership)
- Track vineyard and wine outputs from harvest to bottling

This digital infrastructure represents one of the **most advanced viticultural control systems in the Western Balkans**, enabling **traceability from grape to bottle**. It strengthens compliance with legal requirements and supports Kosovo's ambition to integrate with broader **EU food safety and traceability standards**.

IX. Development of Wine Tourism Infrastructure

A **Tourism Information Center (TIC)** has been established in **Rahovec/Orahovac** as part of a collaborative initiative between **USAID**, the **Municipality of Rahovec/Orahovac**, and local **wine producers**. This initiative aims to enhance the visibility of the region's wine heritage, promote eonotourism (wine tourism), and support the economic diversification of the local agricultural sector.

The TIC serves as a central hub for organizing **guided wine tours**, integrating a range of cultural, historical, and gastronomic experiences. These tours may include:

- Visits to significant local heritage sites, such as the **Helveti Tekke**
- Traditional lunches hosted by **local family-owned wineries**
- A visit to **Kosovo's only handcrafted barrel producer**
- **Wine tastings and guided tours** of participating wineries in the Rahovec region

Grape Fest 2023 – Vine Fest 2023: Celebrating Kosovo's Viticultural Heritage

As part of the **HARDHFEST Festival**, the annual "**Grape Fest – Vine Fest 2023**" is taking place on **September 1–3, 2023**, in Rahovec. This signature event celebrates the rich history and living tradition of grape cultivation and wine production in the region.

The official slogan for the 2023 edition is:

"TOUCH THE GRAPES, TASTE THE VINE"

This theme encapsulates the festival's invitation to both **domestic and international visitors** to engage sensorially and culturally with Rahovec's **millennia-old winemaking heritage**. The slogan emphasizes:

- **Touching the vine** cultivated through generations
- **Experiencing the shape and texture** of authentic local grape leaves, a symbol also integrated into the visual identity of the festival
- **Tasting freshly harvested grapes and regional wines** as a direct connection to local terroir

The festival serves as a dynamic platform for promoting **Kosovo's wine culture**, attracting tourism, and fostering greater appreciation for traditional and contemporary viticultural practices.

<https://www.facebook.com/hardhfest/photos/a.>



X. Kosovo Vine and Wine sector SWOT Analysis

Chart 6: SWOT analysis of Kosovo vine and wine sector

<p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTH</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Favourable climatic and geological for vineyard production ✓ Long history in vine growing and wine production ✓ Existing and efficient vineyard cadastre ✓ Low cost of production ✓ Well-structured and organized wine sector ✓ Initial development of wine tourism through creation of a "Wine route". ✓ Current legal framework for wines partly harmonized with the legislation 	<p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Nursery industry with certified seedlings is almost not existing ✓ No autochthonous varieties specific to Kosovo ✓ Fragmented vine plots into small surfaces ✓ Slow dynamic for new plantings ✓ Low level of domestic wine consumption and wine culture ✓ Wine education (for professional or for amateurs) is almost none existing ✓ Dry goods have to be imported ✓ Heterogeneity of wine quality between producers.
<p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Organic viticulture is emerging ✓ Slow but existing increase in domestic wine consumption ✓ Quality of wines has greatly improved over the last years ✓ Support from international organizations 	<p style="text-align: center;">THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Development of vineyards without adequate varieties ✓ Ageing of existing vineyards ✓ Lack of viticulture and wine making local experts ✓ Increase of alcohol degree in wine due to warming up climate and continental influences ✓ Low government investment in Kosovo cluster development ✓ Weak control on pesticide, planting materials and counterfeited wines