

# Nordic nations love affair with wine

The wine scene in Scandinavia is flourishing, writes **Stephen Quinn**, following a visit to the northernmost countries in Europe



Tom Christensen, owner of Dyrehøj, the largest vineyard in Denmark

**B**ased on wine consumption, the growing number of vineyards and wine bars, the high proportion of wine magazines per head of population and the high concentration of Masters of Wine, the wine scene in the region is flourishing.

**DENMARK** Denmark is the biggest wine producer in Scandinavia with about 1,100 registered wine growers, though only 90 vineyards operate on a commercial basis. Lots of people in the Scandinavian region grow small amounts of grapes for personal consumption as a form of hobby-farming. Sweden has about 80 vineyards of which half are commercial, while Norway has 30 registered growers of which fewer than 10 operate on a commercial basis.

Denmark received European Union permission to make commercial wine in 2000. That year the country only had eight vineyards. Today the industry is developing fast, though like the rest of Scandinavia it is tiny compared with many European nations. Danes consume the most wine per head of population among the Nordic nations, according to Wine Intelligence. Many of the older generations drink heavy reds from the Old World but younger drinkers are less interested in these wine styles and prefer



white, rosé and sparkling wines. These happen to be the style that Denmark's long cool summers naturally produce.

All of the Nordic wine industries have developed because of the availability of grape varieties that can ripen in cold climates. Solaris is Denmark's most important grape. It was one of the disease-resistant vines developed at Germany's Staatliches Weinbauinstitut in the 1970s and is ideal for cool climates. b , often with flavours of elderflower and gooseberry.

Jørgen Aldrich wrote a wine column for one of Denmark's biggest daily newspapers for 35 years. "I have followed the Danish wine scene right from the beginning. Things are changing with evolving climatic conditions. Unfortunately a lot of the [early] winegrowers wanted to produce red wine and especially Amarone styles, which is ridiculous."

Many commentators have noted the boom in production of sparkling wine in England because of its cool climates. A similar evolution could occur in Denmark, Aldrich said. Many high-end Scandinavian restaurants have Danish wines on their lists. It reflects a demand from tourists curious to taste something local. Aldrich considers most Danish wines too expensive.

In September this year, 314 Danish grape and fruit wines from 109 growers entered the Danish Wine Association's 23rd wine show. Gold medals were awarded to 16 wines, with 22 silver and 31 bronze, *Vinbladet* (Danish for Wine Magazine) reported. *Vinbladet* is an independent publication published since 1992, which went online only in December 2015.

Winemaker Sven Moesgaard, founder of Skærsøgaard vineyard, has won more medals than any Danish winemaker. As of mid 2019 he had won 212 awards and this September he gathered another trophy and three medals. Skærsøgaard vineyard ([www.dansk-vin.dk](http://www.dansk-vin.dk)) is near Kolding, two hours west of the capital, Copenhagen. Moesgaard makes up to 20,000 bottles of still and sparkling a year, selling them to restaurants and about 5,000 people



Vines in front of Tom Christensen's house. Christensen bought the farm in 2007 and planted the first vines in 2008

**Solaris is Denmark's most important grape. It makes light and food-friendly wines that can be fashioned into sparkling, dry, or sweet table wines**

a year who visit his lakeside winery. "We have more lactic acid in our wine compared with, say, French wine because we are so northern. It makes it a little bit softer, a little bit [more] creamy."

Dyrehøj ([www.dyrehoj-vingaard.dk](http://www.dyrehoj-vingaard.dk)) is the largest Danish vineyard with 10 hectares of vineyard and about 30,000 vines. It sits on a beautiful peninsula alongside Kalundborg Fjord. In 2007 Bettina Newberry and her brother Tom Christensen discovered that the relatively poor and sandy soil and sunny position made it perfect for vines. The winemaker is Zachary Brierly from New Zealand. The estate mostly grows the white Solaris grape along with Muscaris, Johanniter and Sauvignon Gris as well as the red variety Cabernet Cantor. Muscaris offers notes of honey or dried fruit, and Johanniter is a Riesling cross that can be used to make both dry and sweet wines, while Sauvignon Gris is a Pinot Gris-style grape with pink skin.

In part of Denmark's Zealand region

called Odde, two childhood friends – Anders Ørnberg and Niels Esbjerg – established Ørnberg Wines in 1998. They planted Solaris, Ortega, Phoenix and Pinot Noir vines in 2007 and the plan is to continue to expand to reach an annual output of 20,000 bottles.

**SWEDEN** The Swedish wine industry is more marginal than Denmark's but is also growing. Some sources claim that Roman Catholic monasteries established vineyards in Sweden about 700 years ago when the climate was milder, but the modern industry only started in the late 1990s. Sweden has about 100 hectares under vine, similar in size to Denmark. Norway has the smallest total – about 70 hectares. Some Swedish pioneers, especially in the Scania region, took their inspiration from nearby Denmark. The Association of Swedish winegrowers estimates the Scania region has about 40 vineyards, but this number includes hobby growers who own well under a hectare of vines.

The Swedish winery Klagshamn made its first commercial vintage in 2005. After experiments with grape varieties, Klagshamn today focuses on Solaris and produces about 7,000 bottles a year from its 1.8 hectares of vines. Winemaker Jesper Friberg believes Denmark “are a little ahead” commercially because of the Swedish monopoly on alcohol sales. State wine monopolies in Sweden and Norway offer a major contrast with Denmark, which is the only Nordic nation without a wine monopoly. Swedish wineries are not allowed to offer tastings or sell wine at the cellar door unless they are registered as a restaurant. Despite this, interest in Sweden is growing with large investments, Friberg said.

**NORWAY** Winemaking is growing in Norway as people find grapes that grow well in the Norwegian climate, noted Odd Eugen Wollberg, owner of Lerkekåsa vineyard near Gvarv in southern Norway. Erik Lindås, who is chair of the Norwegian Grape Grower Association which has about 80 members,

**Sweden has about 100 hectares under vine, similar in size to Denmark. Norway has the smallest total – about 70 hectares**



Klagshamn made its first commercial vintage in 2005 and its focus most important grape variety is Solaris

described the winemaking business in Norway as difficult but said that grape varieties such as Solaris and Rondo make it possible. “Ten years ago there were no commercial winemakers in Norway,” Lindås told me. “Last year we were four, [and] next year we will be seven I think.” The number of vines has risen from about 6,000 in 2010 to maybe 25,000 this year with “still more to come.”

Joar Sættem, former winemaker at Lerkekåsa, said he believed the evolution of Norwegian wine production was accelerating. “The vineyards are still quite small with up to a few thousand vines at the most. But both Lerkekåsa in Telemark and the vineyards in western Norway and along the coast of southern Norway – including the Oslo fjord region – are successfully making good wine,” he said.

The Solaris grape with its “fantastic flavours” was promising. “The Russian grape Hasanski Sladki has given excellent rosé at Lerkekåsa and is less vulnerable to frost because of its hardiness. Rondo is also planted” said Sættem, “but I am uncertain to what extent now.”

Lerkekåsa Vineyard has become successful through a combination of innovation, a unique site and good wines. Lerkekåsa is the most northerly commercial vineyard in the world if we focus on sites that do not bury vines in winter to protect them. It sits at 59°N, similar to Alaska in the United States. The temperature can reach minus 30°C in winter. Similar problems with freezing conditions are found in China. There workers bury vines in winter, a labour-intensive process.

It is not possible to buy Norwegian wine at any of the country's wine monopoly (Vinmonopol) shops. But a new law that came into effect in June 2016 allows vineyards to sell up to 15,000 litres of wine a year from the cellar door.

Norway-based wine writer, Ann Samuelson, a student in the prestigious Master of Wine programme, points out that Denmark, Sweden and Finland all grow more grapes than Norway. She said a wine competition organised by the



Norwegian Grape Grower Association in August attracted 35 wines from 10 producers. The prize for this year's best Norwegian wine went to Bjørn Bergum from Slindre farm in Sogndal for his Solaris 2018. He was also named winegrower of the year.

Norway and Sweden share a very long common border but alcohol taxes are lower in Sweden, which encourages a significant percent of the Norwegian population to travel across the border to buy wine and other alcoholic beverages. No reliable sales figures on this trade are available. Norway lacks a traditional wine culture but wine bars are popping up, not only in Oslo but in other major cities like Bergen, Stavanger and Trondheim. Until recently it has not been customary to consume alcohol during the week. Norwegians wait until the weekend, and then binge drink.

A key element in Norwegian policy has been to remove the private profit motive from sales of alcohol as a way to encourage people to drink moderately. It has slightly more than 300 shops, a number that is deliberately limited.

**WINE MONOPOLIES** Vinmonopolet is wholly owned by the State in Norway. The Vinmonopolet is thus an important instrument for making wine, spirits and strong beer available in a form acceptable for society and public health. All countries with a less controlled sales structure compared with Norway have substantially higher per capita consumption – often as much as double.

In Sweden the monopoly is called Systembolaget. Here, the age limit of 20 years for buying wine is strictly enforced. Discounts such as two for one are forbidden and products cannot be favoured. Beer, for example, is not refrigerated. Alcohol in restaurants and bars can only be sold for immediate consumption. Bottles must be opened in the restaurant and cannot be taken home. All wines at wine monopolies are sold with the same profit margin, so that expensive imports such as



The Lerkekåsa vineyard in Norway is successful due to innovation and a unique site

Burgundy can sometimes be purchased at cheaper prices than in the country of origin. Taxes on beer have been reduced in recent years to protect Sweden's brewers.

**Scandinavians have the money to invest in expensive education. The number of Masters of Wine reflects their willingness to pursue this qualification**

**INTEREST IN WINE** Interest in wine has increased noticeably in Scandinavia, with more wine magazines per head than in most European countries. Scandinavians have the money to invest in expensive education. The number of Masters of Wine reflects their willingness to pursue this qualification, the high level of knowledge about wine, and their passion for the grape. The Institute of Masters of Wine points out that more people have gone to the moon than have attained this difficult qualification.

Norway has five MWs as of September 2019, a high number relative to its population of 5.39 million. Sweden, population 10.05 million, has three MWs. Finland has four MWs in a population of 5.53 million. Denmark has none. Wine writer Jørgen Aldrich said the lack of Danish MWs could have something to do with attitude. "Danes are in general more relaxed and laissez-faire than Swedes and Norwegians." He cited the time and money involved in attaining the MW as a major barrier. Thus, it appears the wine scene in Scandinavia is flourishing because of populations with high disposable incomes combined with a growing interest in the grape. ♦