

Rising spirits

Lebanon has witnessed a boom on the alcohol scene recently *By Paul Cochrane*

There is general doom and gloom in the economy in Lebanon, consumer confidence is down and polls indicate general pessimism about the future. But one sector is doing surprisingly well given the current situation, or perhaps because of it: alcohol. Across the alcohol spectrum it is more, more and more. More importation choice, more wines, more breweries and more places to drink. As with many other consumer trends, this reflects global trends: drinking better and with greater variety.

A decade ago, there were three primary choices on the drinks table: blended whisky, Almaza beer, and red or white wine. Today, a good spread may feature in addition to the above: vodka, single malt whisky, rosé wine and locally produced craft beer. In many respects, the changes today reflect what the market went through in the 1960s, when arak — that beloved drink accompanying mezza on a lazy weekend — declined in popularity in favor of Scotch as taste buds started to change.

But the alcohol scene today is unlike anything the country has seen before. It has matured, and fast. While only three rosé wines were on offer at Vintage Wine Cellar several years ago, today there are 25. The same goes for single malt whiskies and the selection of international wines. Beer has equally diversified, with Brasserie Almaza offering five different beers, and two new local beers entering the market this year. Decadence has also become more muted as tastes have become more discerning.

“The opulence of the last 10 years has ended, when people were popping Salmanazar (nine liter) and Jeroboam (three liter) bottles of champagne at nightclubs; people are showing off less,” says Nagi Morkos, managing partner at Hodema, a consultancy service.

Instead, consumer behavior has diversified and moved upmarket. It has become about drinking a specific vodka in a cocktail, going for a single malt instead of a blended whisky and asking what local wines are on the menu. Consumer trends have also become associated with perceived calorie intake: less

in vodka, more in whisky, which partly explains the spirit's popularity in the nightlife scene.

Yet the ostentatious nightlife the capital has become renowned for has not disappeared. A distributor will still spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to have one of their vodka brands advertised at a leading rooftop club to gain attention locally, also knowing the broader impact of Beirut's jet setting circles.

The country's certain global cache is reflected in its alcohol's popularity abroad. With the domestic market as limited as the land for growing grapes, the country's 40 vineyards are choosing to produce quality over quantity — which means export. Lebanese wine is now gracing the menus of Michelin starred restaurants in France, is being imbibed in New York and London and has been the *vin de table* for the Queen of England.

When it comes to beer, Kassatly Chtaura named its new lager Beirut with the export market in mind, and 961 — named after the country's calling code — exports to the US, Europe and Hong Kong. New craft beer brewery Colonel, just two months after opening, has already had inquiries from European importers.

With another major commercial beer brewery planned, the craft brewing scene starting to flourish, awards being won at international wine festivals and more quality arak being distilled, Lebanon is truly going through an alcohol renaissance, despite what is happening in the immediate neighborhood.

Here's to a glass of local wine, beer or arak. *Kesak!*

