

# MOUNTAIN OF WINE

**SCENE STEALER**  
The view from the  
Ishak Pasha Palace in  
Doğubayazıt, Turkey.

Tim Atkin MW sets off on an adventure with lofty plans to launch a wine at the summit of Mount Ararat and to plant smuggled Armenian vine cuttings close to Noah's legendary vineyard.

It all began with an email. Zorik Gharibian, an Armenian wine producer I'd met at conference in Turkey, had what he described as "an outlandish idea" and wondered if I was up for a challenge. His plan, heavy with symbolism for an Armenian, was to launch his new wine on top of Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey. Would I join him and a team of seven other climbers? I Googled details of the peak and it looked daunting: 5,165 metres in altitude and permanently topped with ice and snow, even in summer. It isn't Everest, but it's 358 metres higher than Mont Blanc in Switzerland and way beyond my experience or comfort zone.

Further searches were no more encouraging. One site listed no fewer than 47 reasons not to climb Mount Ararat, including robbery, altitude sickness, hypothermia and potential terrorist attack. And then there was its name in Turkish: Ağrı Dağı means the Mountain of Pain. In short, this was not your usual summer holiday. Even if I didn't get kidnapped by Kurdish separatists, the chances of falling ill or, worse, down a crevasse sounded worrying.

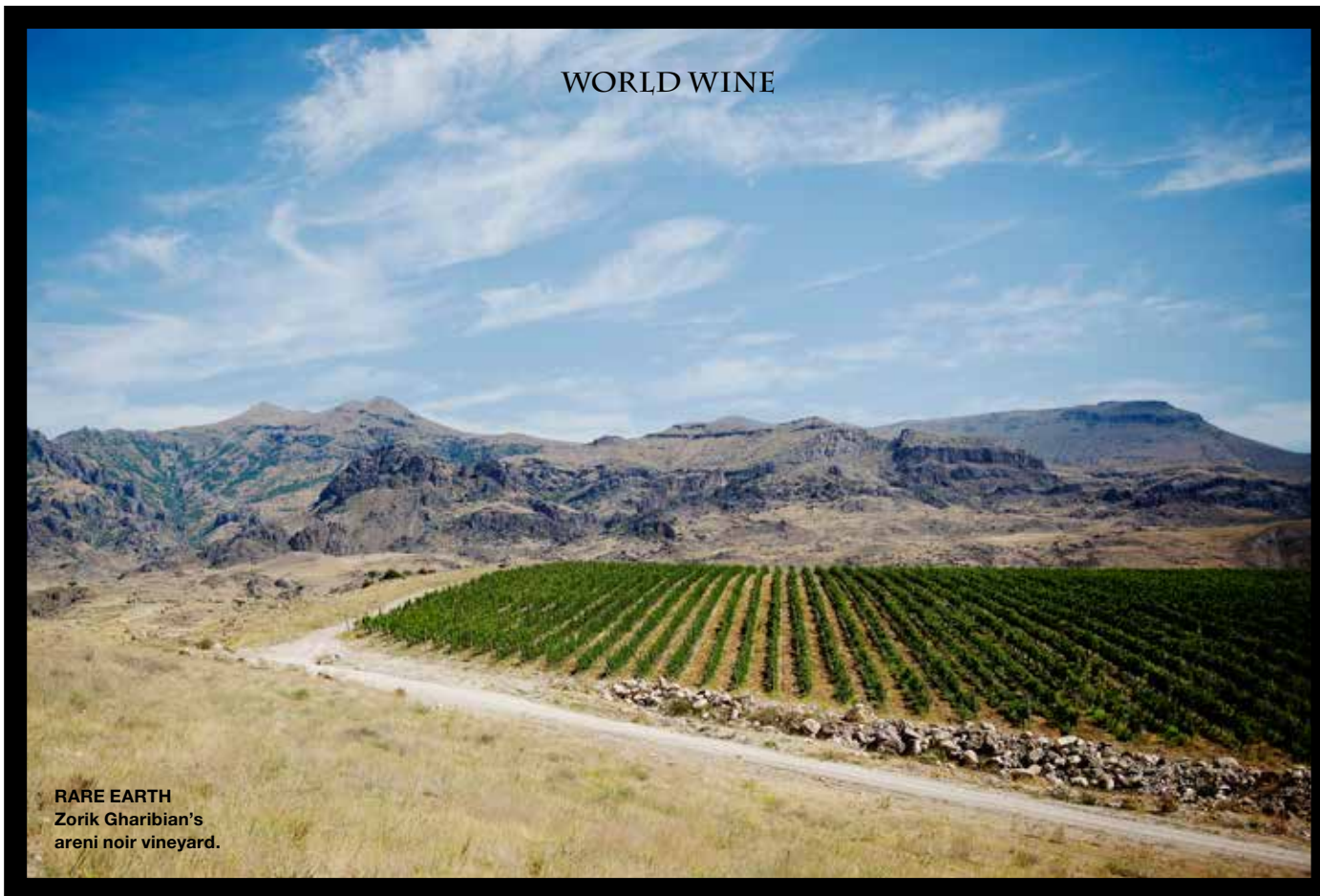
Some people climb Mount Ararat for religious reasons. The dormant volcano is a holy mountain for Muslims and Christians. Both the Quran and the Old Testament say that Noah's (or Nuh's) Ark ran aground here after the great flood, although neither book is terribly precise about its final resting place. The former talks about the "hills of al-Gudi" the latter about the "mountains of Ararat."

There are still regular tours to the mountain looking for remnants of Noah's Ark and, since 1989, a Turkish-funded Noah's Ark Visitors' Centre to keep credulous tourists happy. From time to time, someone finds a piece of wood on Ararat and claims that it's part of the Ark. There's also a famous boat-shaped mound on one of its slopes, first spotted in the 1950s by a Turkish air force pilot, that's sometimes cited as 'proof' of the story of the flood. However, the balance of probability suggests that the Ark lies elsewhere, or nowhere at all.

I decided to scale Mount Ararat for other, secular reasons. My love of wine was foremost among them. Genesis tells us that Noah was "the first tiller of the soil." According to the Bible, as the waters subsided, almost the first thing he did was plant a vineyard, later becoming famously drunk on his own wine. Even if you don't believe the story of the universal deluge, and it's the longest of long shots, I like the idea that Noah personifies man's relationship with the vine and its fruit. Did the first vigneron experience the world's first hang-over? It's a nice thought.

And then there's the story of Friedrich Parrot, the German scholar who was the first man to climb Mount Ararat in 1829. Some might warm to his initial sighting of the mountain, which filled him with an "overwhelming sense of the mighty works of the Creator", but I prefer the details of his drinking habits. As they crossed the Caucasus, he and his entourage stopped for a piss up in Georgia. I like the sound of his determination, too. The villagers of Arguri, where he made base camp, told him that no one could climb the mountain and survive, but after three attempts he made it to the top. As he and his fellow climbers stood on the summit, they drank wine in honour of Noah. It seemed like a good omen.

WORLD WINE



**RARE EARTH**  
Zorik Gharibian's  
areni noir vineyard.

So there I was, six months later, landing in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, in the middle of an electrical storm, the sky bruised with angry black and purple clouds. I had the requisite kit after an expensive visit to a mountaineering store in London, I'd done the training in the gym, but would I make it to the top? I didn't have much hope of finding Noah's Ark, but I clung to the idea of encountering an outcrop of wild vines, like the ones I'd seen in other parts of eastern Anatolia. And more than that, I wanted to do a Parrot: to conquer Ararat, wine in hand, and toast something that gives me daily pleasure.

Ararat is a vital part of Armenia's national identity. The Armenians consider it to be the centre or, alternatively, the mother of the world. Its conical outline can be seen on bank notes, on the stamp that's put in your passport at immigration and on labels of Armenian mineral water, beer and brandy. Ararat dominates Yerevan's skyline, but to the irritation of Armenians, it's located in another country. The border with Turkey, regarded as Armenia's greatest enemy since the genocide of 1915, which saw at least a million people murdered, has been closed since the early 1990s and is protected by barbed wire, tank traps and watchtowers.

To get to Ararat from Yerevan you have to go via Georgia. A trip that would take less than an hour if the Turks and Armenians settled their long-standing differences occupies the best part of a day instead. It's difficult for Armenians to visit what they call "western Armenia" and it's illegal for them to climb Ararat. Armenians who do scale its peak bring back stones and snowmelt for relatives and friends. Several people we met on our journey, including Armenia's most famous female singer, Shushan Petrosyan, cried when we told them of our destination.

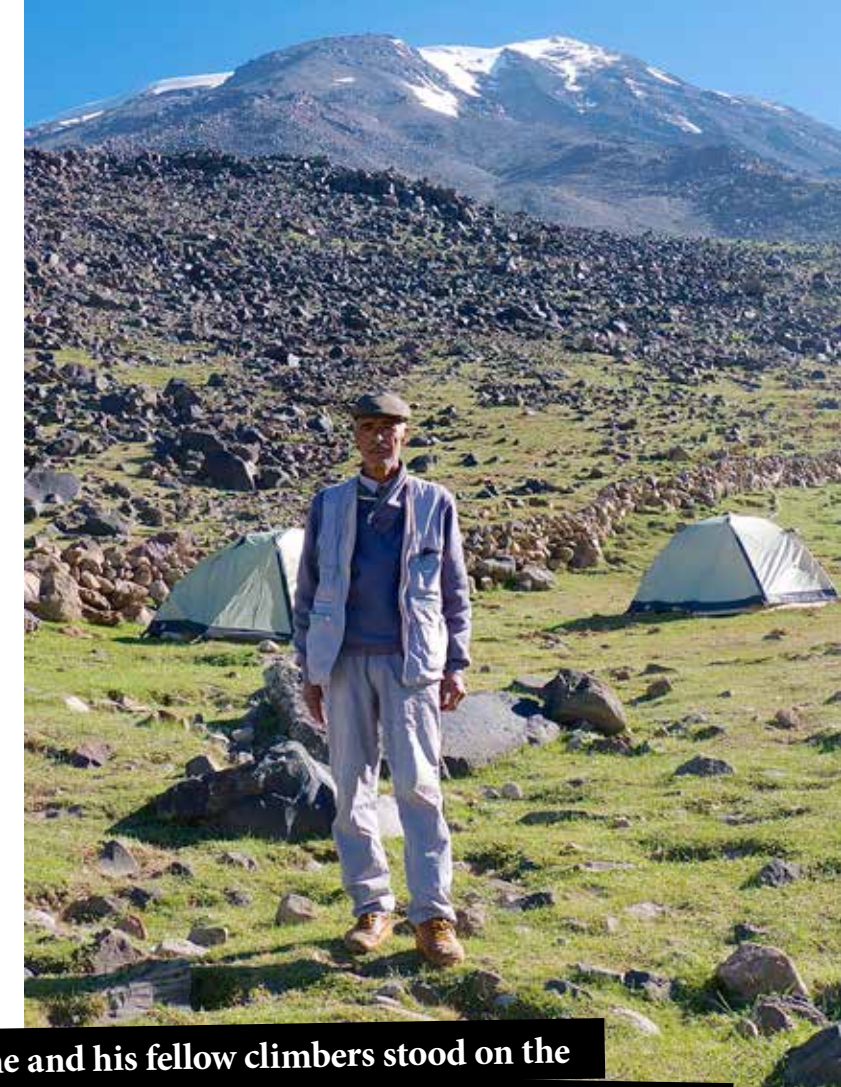
Before we set off for Turkey, we had some things to collect: two bottles of 2012 Zorah Yeraz, the wine that Zorik Gharibian wanted to launch at the summit, and some cuttings of areni noir, the Armenian grape from which it is made. Our plan was to plant a few vines on Ararat as a symbolic gesture of what one of our group dubbed "terroir-ism". All we had to do was smuggle them through two borders as we crossed from Armenia into Georgia and Georgia into Turkey. Memories of the film *Midnight Express* tugged at my mind.

Zorah is not the sole winery in Armenia – there are around 50 of them in total – but it's the best by some distance and the only one with an international reputation of any consequence. A good deal of the local vino is sold in bulk as so-called "cola wine" to drivers on their way back to teetotal Iran, disguised in Coca Cola bottles. But things are changing. Partly because of the success of Zorah, two international wine consultants, Frenchman Michel Rolland and American Paul Hobbs, have become involved with Armenian projects. "You can't put Armenia on the world map with one wine," concedes Gharibian.

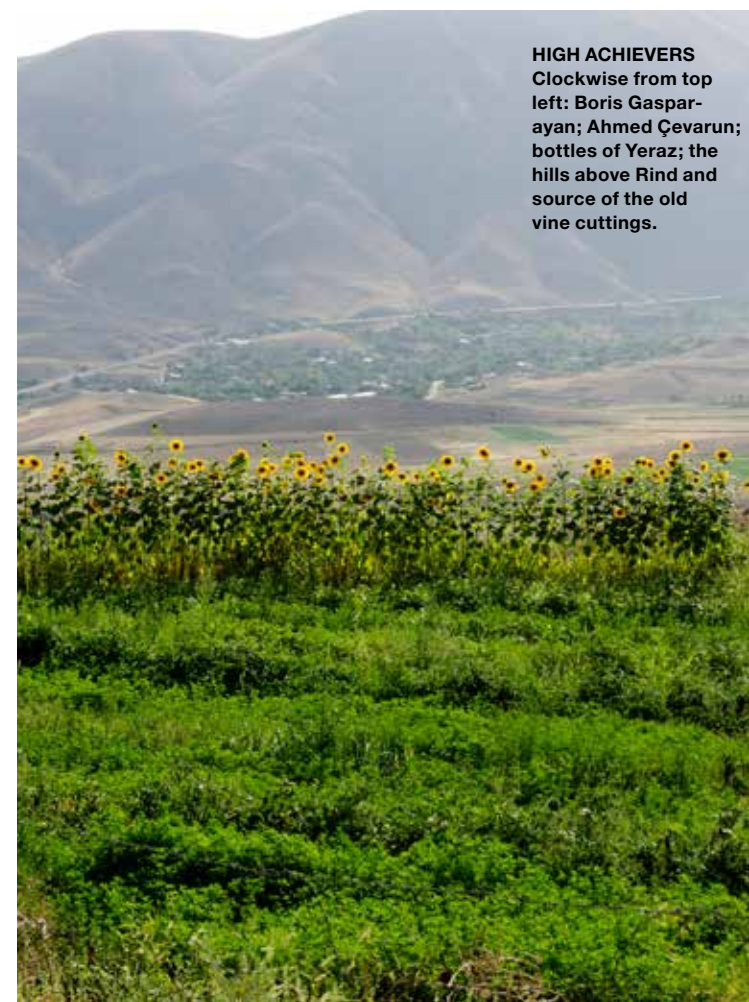
A product of the Armenian diaspora that created sizeable communities in America, France and the Middle East, Gharibian was born in Iran and didn't visit Armenia until 1998. He went to boarding school in Italy as a 14 year old after the Iranian revolution deposed the shah and has lived most of his life in Milan, running a fashion business. For all that, he describes himself as a "passionate Armenian", which is why he decided to set up a winery there in 2006 with his wife, Yeraz. "Armenia is on my label and in my heart," he says.

Gharibian had had the idea of creating a wine estate in Armenia for many years, but it took time to find the right site. The one he eventually settled on is in the south of the country close to the fractious border with Azerbaijan. He planted his first nine hectares on a bare, sandy limestone plateau in Rind, near the town of Areni, taking advantage of an irrigation project funded by the World Bank. He only ever wanted to use indigenous Armenian grapes and chose areni noir after talking to the Italian viticultural consultant, Stefano Bartolomei, and his oenologist, Alberto Antonini. "I collected 10 bottles of local wines made with areni noir and took them to Alberto in Florence. Eight of them were oxidised, but even so he saw the grape's potential."

Gharibian has since supplemented his own plantings with grapes sourced from 100-year-old vines in the hills above Rind. These vineyards were so remote that they survived the Soviet vine pull scheme instituted by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, when the USSR decided that Armenia should make brandy, not wine. It is these sprawling bush vines, located at 1,600 metres, that produced the first vintage of Zorah's top cuvée, Yeraz, and from which we took our cuttings. We



As he and his fellow climbers stood on the summit, they drank wine in honour of Noah.



**HIGH ACHIEVERS**  
Clockwise from top left: Boris Gasparayan; Ahmed Çevarun; bottles of Yeraz; the hills above Rind and source of the old vine cuttings.



## WORLD WINE



**PERFECTLY PLACED**  
The Ararat Café at base camp, plus the offending nettles.

sampled the wine at the winery and it was superb, like a cross between sangiovese and nebbiolo perhaps, but with a character all its own. But what would it taste like on top of Mount Ararat? And would we make it to 5,165 metres to find out?

Areni noir is an intriguing variety. The Swiss academic, Dr José Vouillamoz, co-author with Jancis Robinson and Julia Harding of *Wine Grapes* as well as a respected ampelographer, confirms that it is “part of an Armenian genetic group that includes the old varieties khatun, khardjzhi, chilar and tozot”. It’s been in Armenia for some time, but no one knows exactly how long. One intriguing possibility is that it dates back more than 6,100 years, according to Boris Gasparyan of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography in Yerevan.

It was Gasparayan, a dishevelled Armenian Indiana Jones-type, who discovered the Areni cave complex in 2007, which includes traces of what is (to date at least) the world’s oldest winery. The cave is on a hillside behind a roadside-restaurant called Yedem, fenced off from the outside world by just a padlocked wire gate. Gasparayan reckons there is 150 years’ worth of archaeological work to be done here – assuming the right funding can be found – and his conclusions are tentative. He doesn’t know which grapes were used to make the wine that was fermented and stored in the cave, but he says it could well have been areni noir.

Intriguingly, he thinks the cave was the site of ritual sacrifices. “We found a knife-sharpening block on the wall that was used for butchery,” he says. “Human butchery.” Next to the vessels that contained residues of wine, lay a knife used to slit throats. Inside them, there were human remains, including a drinking cup made from a skull and several bones, mostly from young women. Blood and wine, he believes, were blended together here, giving new meaning to the term full-bodied. “Wine and death were part of the same cycle,” he says. “Perhaps this cave represented a journey to the next life.”

It was time to begin a journey of our own. Moving north through Armenia, we followed the old Silk Road, stopping off at some of the country’s most beautiful monasteries: Noravank, Haghartsin and Khor Virap. Gazing up at their vastness from the Armenian side, the last of this trio faces the peaks of Mount Ararat and, its smaller twin,

Little Ararat. The mountain we were about to climb looked terrifying in the near distance – inhospitable, daunting and very, very high.

Twenty-four hours later we were in Doğubayazıt, a dusty garrison town in eastern Turkey that serves as a dormitory for those who want to climb Ararat. We’d made it through the border crossings with the bottles and the areni noir cuttings intact. Our guide, Burhan Çervarun from Top Ararat, was sitting with us at breakfast trying to calm our apprehension. This was not a technical climb, he said, so we wouldn’t need ropes and hooks. It would just be a slog to the top. He’d already climbed Ararat 21 times in 2014 and was predicting good weather.

We were dropped off by our minibus at 2,200 metres, just past the hamlet of Eli, and started walking. The trek to the first camp at 3,200 metres was easy. I did it in trainers and shorts, strolling across green fields strewn with thistles, foxgloves and euphorbia. At 2,800 metres we stopped to plant our vines, creating the highest ‘vineyard’ outside South America. We placed them at the bottom of a rocky overhang, sheltered from the wind but not necessarily from sheep and goats, and gave them a good draught of mineral water. It was only a gesture, but it felt good to have left an Armenian mark on an Armenian mountain.

Our next stop was with Burhan’s family, who spend the summer in a large tent on the mountain and between them seem to control the tourist trade on Ararat. His mother, Fatma, and his three sisters, Çemam, Ece and Esmer, cooked lunch and served us tea. The lamb we ate could not have been fresher. As we arrived, it was still walking around outside the tent. Twenty minutes later it was on our plates. One way or another, sacrifice was a theme of our trip.

We slept that night at 3,228 metres, with views from base camp over the valley and upwards towards the cloud-covered peak of Ararat. The moon glowed above us in silence. Ours was a huddle of colourful, wind-blown tents, clinging to the flank of something wild and elemental. The next day’s climb was much tougher. The air was thinner, the tracks narrower and our lungs, knees and feet were starting to ache. We pitched camp that afternoon at 4,200 metres on a boulder-strewn bit of ground to the side of a waterfall. From my tent, I could see Little Ararat below me. Scared and apprehensive, I dozed fitfully, dreaming of avalanches.



**We’d taken part in the highest wine launch ever, opening a great bottle of wine at 5,165 metres.**

The climb to the top started at 2am. The reason for the early rise is that you need to be at the snowline, where you don’t crampons for the final push, before it starts to melt and make the going slushy. Our headlamps glowed in the dark, a small, almost monastic procession making its way, step by step, towards the summit. Two of our number succumbed to altitude sickness, but six of us kept climbing. Your hands are frozen, your muscles are burning, but adrenaline, companionship and the fear of failure drive you onwards. I was climbing for Pebbles, a South African charity that helps disadvantaged children in the Cape wine lands, and I was desperate not to let them down.

At 7am, we stood on the top of the mountain, buffeted by the wind but with jaw-dropping views on every side. The three Armenians in our party, all of them travelling on foreign passports, went to the edge of the mountain to look down at Yerevan. The rest of us stood on the peak, hugging, laughing and feeling profoundly exhilarated. It was time to do what we’d come for: launch the 2012 Yeraz. Like Friedrich Parrot before us, we toasted Noah, the world’s first vigneron, with a bottle of wine. The liquid blew sideways out the bottle, some of it into our glasses, the rest onto the snow like drops of blood.

Getting to the top of Ararat is bad enough. Getting down is arguably worse. My toes kept colliding with end of my boots, I slipped on scree every few yards and continually fell onto the rocks. By the time we reached base camp it was 4pm. We’d been on the mountain for 14 hours, with nothing but a short break for lunch. My legs were so tired that I collapsed in a patch of nettles, incapable of holding myself upright.

That night we drank alcohol for the first time in three days. There are enough things to worry about on Ararat without being tipsy. Turkish beer has never tasted so good. And then there was our second bottle of Yeraz. We sat down to a stew that evening on low stools around a communal table. Zorik pulled the cork and, unusually for him, sniffed it. Disaster! TCA had done its worst, but we drank the wine anyway, grateful that we’d carried the right bottle to the summit.

The next morning we walked back to where the bus had left us on the first day. On the way, we checked on the progress of our areni noir vines. They were still alive, neither eaten by livestock nor snapped in half by the wind. Our guide promised to water them every time he passed, but I don’t hold out much hope for their survival. Ararat is a brutal place. Legend has it that even Noah planted his vineyard at much lower altitudes in what was once the town of Arguri, whose name was an amalgamation of two words: argh (he planted) and urri



**PEAK PERFORMERS**  
Clockwise from top left: Areni Cave; celebrating at the top; Mount Ararat from base camp.

(vines). Parrot and his group saw vineyards there, but like the rest of Arguri, they were swept away by a landslide in 1840. That brutality again.

It was time to return to Yerevan, retracing our steps through Georgia and northern Armenia. We hadn’t seen any vines on Ararat, other than the two we planted, and there was no trace of the Ark, unless you count pictorial representations on postcards in Doğubayazıt. We didn’t even spot a dove. But the six of us who made it to the top of Ararat had done something we will never forget. We’d taken part in the highest wine launch ever, opening a great bottle of wine at 5,165 metres, and we’d overcome our fears and weaknesses to do so. Mountain of Pain? Maybe. But to me, Ararat will always be more than that. It’s my very own Mountain of Wine.

*Zorah is available through Cellarhand at [www.cellarhand.com.au](http://www.cellarhand.com.au)*