

CRISTINA TUFTS OF HARBOR WINES

By Teddy Durgin

Harbor Wines is bringing the richness of Eastern European wines to Maryland. At the helm of this venture is Cristina Tufts, who grew up in Moldova where she learned the art of viticulture. Moldova, a small country that borders Romania and Ukraine, boasts especially fertile soil that makes it ideal for growing some of the world's best grapes.

"My family made wine," Tufts said, during a recent interview with the *Beverage Journal*. "Therefore, I grew up learning the process. Ironically though, I never had an appreciation for Moldovan wines until I came to the United States. Here, I had better access to wines from around the world. . . . It took leaving Moldova to realize just how good our wine is."

Tufts came to America with a student visa in 2007. She met and fell in love with Brian Tufts, a U.S. Army officer, and the two were soon married. She eventually returned to her home country and graduated with a Business degree. "On Brian's first trip to Moldova," she recalled, "he recognized the high quality wines right away. I remember getting ready for a movie and popcorn, and I opened a bottle of 1987 Codru - a cab-merlot blend. After tasting the wine and realizing its vintage, he thought I was crazy for opening such a bottle for anything short of a special occasion or celebration. I told him I would just run to the corner store and get another bottle. 'We have to figure out how to bring this to the USA!' he exclaimed. 'The price versus quality is unreal!'"

The Tufts returned to the U.S. in 2009, and Brian's military career relocated them to Texas. She was sure, one day, his job would enable them to settle down so she could start a wine import and distribution business. But, in 2013, Brian got deployed to Afghanistan and she went back home to Moldova. She dedicated that year to research and winery visits. Eventually, he did get a Washington, D.C., assignment and the couple purchased a home. Tufts was then free to pursue her business goals, and she launched Harbor Wines.



She states, "The D.C. area is the center of the free world and it is a place where people love to drink wine! I have a few great accounts. However, my biggest one so far is the Gaylord National Harbor resort, where I am currently a vendor." Her company's line of Moldovan wines can also be purchased at Dunkirk Wine and Spirits in Dunkirk, Md.; the Potomac Gourmet Market in Oxon Hill; Old Line Fine Wine, Spirits, & Bistro in Beltsville; and Whole Foods supermarkets throughout Northern Virginia.

"One of my favorite wines is our White Cabernet, very crisp and refreshing, mild and approachable," she stated. "Codru, of course, is an outstanding Red blend: 75 percent Cab 25 percent Merlot. It's just the perfect marriage. Rara Neagra is another outstanding variety indigenous to Moldova. Some say it is Moldova's equivalent of a Pinot Noir with a lot of fruit notes finish."

When asked if there was some entrepreneurial advice given to her that has proven especially helpful, she immediately cracked wise, "Don't drink your profits!" But then she added, "When working for yourself, you have to be the person who focuses, because nobody else will. I also quickly learned that I needed to be well versed on not just the category of the wine, but the story that goes along with the wine - where it was made, the type of grape, the best way to serve it, what it goes with, etc."

She credits her mother, her husband, his family, her American adopted family ("Lynn and Dave"), and Dunkirk Wine and Spirits owner Beth Joiner among those who have given her the support needed to come this far in a very competitive business. "And I must thank Dmitrii Curbet, who has been - and still is - at the very core of what I do. He's been importing wine for a little over a decade. Without his help, I may not have been as successful."

Looking ahead, she is eager to put in the work necessary to reach her objectives for 2017 and beyond. She concluded, "I have a very ambitious goal of being Moldova's largest importer and, therefore, help its economy. I truly believe that if I keep my goals true to the Moldovan culture, and promote not just the wine, but the culture surrounding it, the sales will follow."

Harbor Wines is based at the National Harbor development in Prince George's County, Md. ■