

From the ashes

Thanks to the island's explosive history, fine wines from Lanzarote's volcanic vineyards offer visitors plenty of bang for their buck

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In 1730 a dramatic volcanic eruption shook the island of Lanzarote. For six years black ash rained down over a quarter of the island, reducing once-productive pastures to a desert moonscape. The farmers were devastated, until one had a brilliant idea. Perhaps vines would flourish in the nutrient-rich dust?

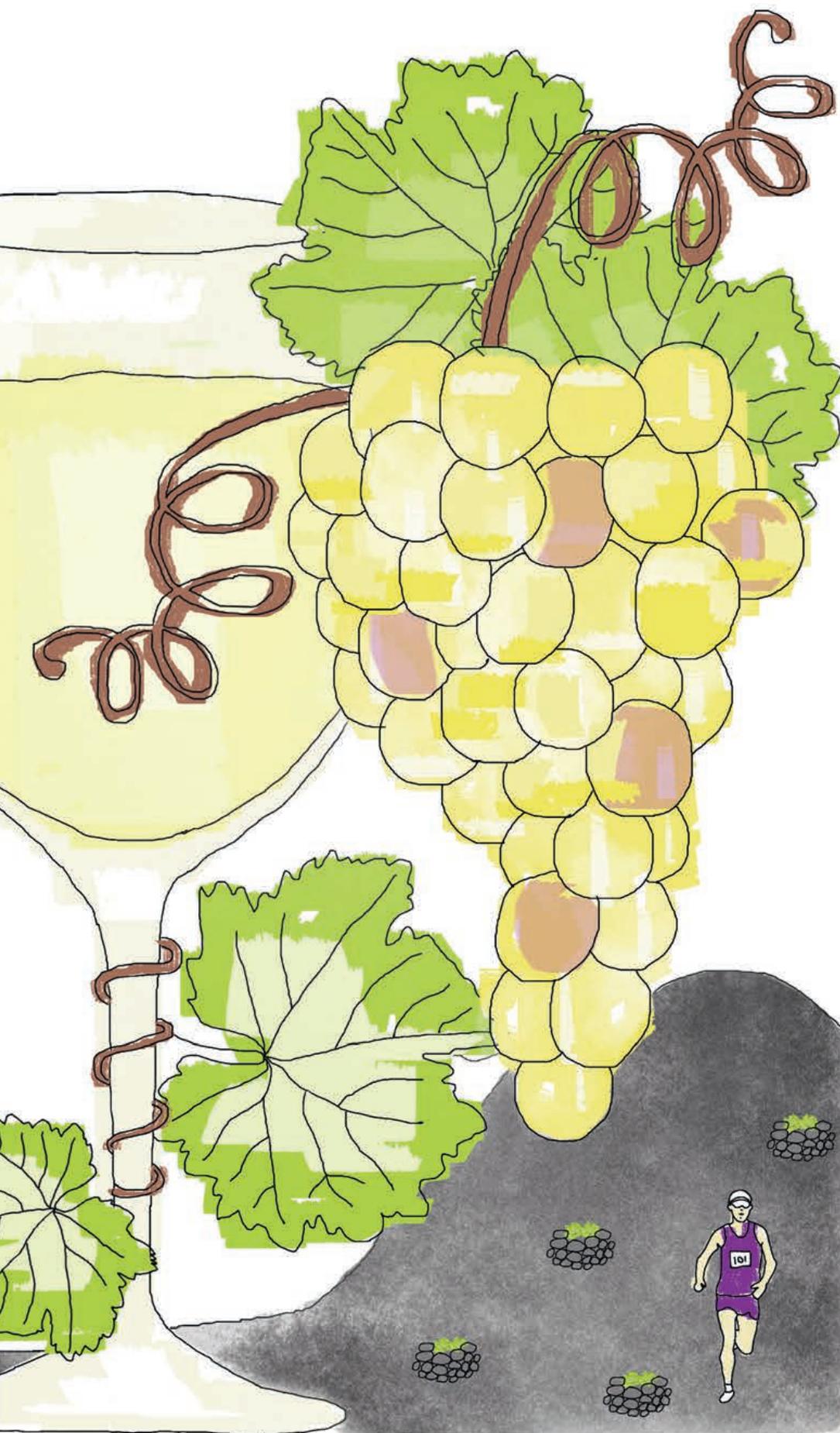
At best the plan was wobbly. Lanzarote sits just 130km from the African coast and receives near zero rainfall from May to October – great for holidaymakers but a viticultural no-no. However, the ash cooled the vines as they seared in the Canarian sun and the spongy ground actually retained water, especially when the vines were dug into a deep hollow. As the reputation of the resulting wines started to spread, more than 10,000 seedlings were thrust into the dust. Soon, these vineyards were commended for their earthy bouquet, a legacy of the mineral-rich soil. Wine and fruit were exported to the London Docklands – hence the name Canary Wharf.

Driving through Lanzarote's vineyards today is an otherworldly experience. The red rock and charred earth of Timanfaya National Park – where the still-active volcano erupted nearly 300 years ago – gives way to black badlands studded with lime-green vines. El Grifo (elgrifo.com), the

island's oldest vineyard, set up shop here in 1775. The timber-beamed cellar is now a wine museum that contains hessian saddlebags and manual wine crushers. Until recently camels were used to collect the grapes, and production is still carried out almost entirely by hand. Little wonder that El Grifo won more than 20 significant awards in 2016, mostly for its Malvasia, a dry white that zings with tropical zeal. The vineyard's Ariana red, made with tough Listán negro grapes that adore the Canary sun, is fiercer and tannic, with a flinty finish derived from the volcanic soil.

Nearby Los Bermejos (losbermejos.com) winery shows that growing grapes in the mid-Atlantic is not as nutty as it seems. At these sunny latitudes (Lanzarote sits at 28° north, like Mexico and Saudi Arabia) grapes ripen in August, not in October like mainland Europe. Bugs and snails loathe the volcanic sand so pests are non-existent. These isolated spots were also spared the aphids that destroyed most of Europe's vineyards in the 1860s. Los Bermerjo's Diego Seco vintage uses Vigiriega grapes that were common in Europe 150 years ago, but are now found only in the Canaries. Sip this honey-hued organic brew and you'll experience wine as it would have tasted centuries ago. ➔





Visitors hoping to sample something more contemporary can make a toast to modernity just a short drive away. Since 2009 the aptly named Bodega Vulcano (bodegavulcano.es) has offered an experimental alternative to Lanzarote's 15 traditional vineyards. "We wanted to blend island flavours with state-of-the-art equipment," explains company director Víctor Díaz. "The result is that visitors can see Lanzarote grapes ageing in our cellar, then sample this year's vintage in the new tasting room above. And hopefully buy some bottles too!" Bodega Vulcano's priciest wine is a limited-edition sweet Muscat that ages in a single, 300-bottle cask, tastes like seventh heaven, and sells for only £20 a pop.

This year the island welcomes another newcomer in the form of the Lanzarote WineRun (lanzarotewinerun.com), a half-marathon that weaves through a dozen volcanic wineries. The victor wins their own weight in wine, which is sure to have seasoned tipplers running back for more. ^{TC}

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Pick of the bunch
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- 1 Spanish conquistadors brought vines to the hills above Havana. Cuba's tropical climate means that grapes can be harvested twice a year, with most of the resulting booze ending up in its many resort hotels.
- 2 On the Venice lagoon the Dorona grape – a golden nugget the size of a quail's egg – was brought back from near-extinction ten years ago. This explosive white wine sells for £100 per 50cl bottle at the Michelin-starred Venissa restaurant on the island of Mazzorbo.
- 3 Izmir has had a dozen wineries since Roman times. The best bet for visitors is Urla, where ten wines are available to sample, including a fruity red made from sun-loving Nero d'Avola vines imported from Sicily.

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