

wine in time

And Then We Drank..... More Greek Wine!!!

I hope you caught my passion in the last issue of The Rosengarten Report.....when I ranted and raved about a red-wine grape variety from northern Greece, called Xinomavro, that I think deserves to be in any discussion of the world's greatest grape varieties. But I wouldn't want you to get the impression that my love and respect for Greek wine end there.

Since writing the Xinomavro story, I have been back to Greece for a third visit in 2006, so enchanted am I by all things gastronomic from that country. And I've been carefully putting together my overall Greek wine impressions in 2006.....so that you, in case you haven't gotten off the blocks yet, can start acquiring some of the world's most delicious and food-friendly wines while they're still very affordable.

Beyond Xinomavro.....here are the Greek grape varieties, producers and wine types that you need to know about now:

Grape Varieties

Moschofilero

This white-wine grape (pronounced mos-ko-FEE-lair-o), grown principally in the Mantinia region in the Peloponnese, could be the break-out Greek white variety; it's already getting some play at non-Greek restaurants in the U.S. It is more like Riesling than anything else: light, floral, low in alcohol, sometimes a touch off-dry, great for food. I love it. Domaine Tselepos in Mantinia--which also makes a terrific dry Gewurztraminer--is my favorite Moschofilero source. Another good one is made nearby at the organic, very impressive Domaine Spiropoulos. Look for the youngest possible vintage.

Assyrtico

Another great white-wine grape with huge international potential. This one is grown on Santorini, and the textbooks say that the earthy, stony, volcanic

soil comes through in this dry, super-acidic wine. In reality, I found three types of Santorini Assyrtico. The most useful type--which really matches the description--is not available in the U.S., because it's too inexpensive! I had to trek up to the Santorini co-op to find a few \$6 bottles of this fish-lovin' stuff. The second type breaks my heart--it is made by rich, big-deal wineries seeking to be loved overseas. You know what that means: less dry, less acidic, much richer in body, much more alcoholic. Be careful. However, the saving grace is the third type--for many of the best wineries also make a barrel-fermented Santorini and, somehow or other, sometimes end up with a wine that can age for a decade into earthy sublimity, ending up like a good white Rioja or aged white Bordeaux with great balance. Here's a tip for right now: get your hands on a case of 2004 Boutari Kallisti fast, for it is going to age into a roasted-pistachio, curry-leaf miracle (and it costs only \$16 a bottle).

Kotsifali

Skip this paragraph if what you like in red wine is color, more color, then extract, and more extract. Kotsifali is a winemaker's nightmare grown principally in Crete--but, when it's right, produces a fabulous old-world kind of wine, light in color but rich in complexity. A few years back, I tasted the 2001 Vin de Crete, and the 2000 Mirambelo, both from Creta Olympias, and loved them; unfortunately, they may not be available any longer. This year, I tasted a simple one in Greece--at \$7 a bottle!--that also rang my chimes: the 2004 Kretikos Boutari, so graceful for food. Don't expect Kotsifali to become an international sensation.....but do stock up on it for house red, especially if you like the taste of aged red wine.

Mavrotragano

At the opposite end of the red-wine spectrum is Mavrotragano--an old, old, almost-forgotten Santorini variety that, resuscitated, creates, according to leading Greek wine writer Konstantinos Lazarakis, "a new breed of Greek red: deep, dense in color, concentrated, 'old-viney' on the nose but without a single hot note, while the palate is rich and coated with graceful tannins." This is the kind of dark red wine I like! I went right to the source, the Domaine Sigalas on Santorini where, in the mid-1990s, Paris Sigalas began his experiments with Mavrotragano. I tasted several vintages with him--and flipped over the 2003, with its absolutely wild nose of berries, plums, herbs, eucalyptus, sweaty saddle, and, of all things, grapes. This may be hard to find, but is worth the effort.

Producers

Gaia Wines

When I covered Greek wines, in the August 18, 2003 Rosengarten Report, I flipped over the wines of Gaia (pronounced YA-ya!), a company based in Nemea in the Peloponnese. I have since dined with the winemaker, Yiannis Paraskevopoulos, in Greece, and maintain my position that he may be the country's best winemaker. Everything he turns out has incredible harmony and polish. I love his Santorini whites (called Thalassitis), his Notios labels, his Agiorgitikos, and, best of all, his incredible barrel-aged Retsina, called Ritinitis (the only "serious" retsina in Greece.)

Domaine Skouras

I visited this Nemea-area winery in August, and couldn't believe what I was tasting: George Skouras, who founded his winery in 1986 near Argos, is one of the most artistic, individualistic winemakers I've ever met. This guy makes wine like a three-star chef makes food; his creativity, both aesthetic and technical, knows no bounds. Skouras' most famous wine is the incredibly expensive Megas Oenos, a combination of Agiorgitiko and Cabernet Sauvignon; oddly, it's one of my least favorite wines in his stable. But I freaked out this summer tasting his Chardonnay (yes!), his Viognier, his Viognier Eclectique, his Merlot, his Saint George Nemea, and his Grande Cuvée Nemea.

Domaine Gerovassiliou

Another modern winemaker in Greece who inspires general adulation is Evangelos Gerovassiliou, owner of this highly regarded domaine just southwest of Thessaloniki; insiders speak of the "Gerovassiliou Midas Touch." I am not quite as enthused as everyone else, for Gerovassiliou wines often sacrifice their Greek souls on the pillar of international fashion-especially the big, rich, kind-of-sweet dry white wines. But after a long tasting at the winery, I realized that I love one of the Gerovassiliou wines: the Avaton, a quirky blend of Santorini's "lost" variety Mavrotagano, local Mavroudi, and Limnio (from an Aegean island not far away). Fermented in large oak barrels, aged in barriques, the wine is dark-purple, but wildly complex (minerals and game), and usually very graceful. Both the 2004 and 2005 were highly appealing to me.

Mercouri Estate

This 19th-century winery, re-launched in the late 1980s, is located in Ilia, on the northwest side of the Peloponnese. I didn't visit, but I tasted their wines in Athens--and could see the star quality (though the winery has nothing to do with Greece's most famous film star, Melina Mercouri). They make beautiful, elegant, dry red wines from the local variety Mavrodaphne (usually used only for sweet wines!), and Refosco, an Italian variety first planted here in the 19th century (and now known locally as "Mercoureiko!"). But my favorite wine of all was the 2003 Antares, an incredibly suave, complex blend of Avgoustiatis, a little-known Ionian grape, and the Rhone Valley's Mourvedre.

Meden Agan

Just a word for a small, lovely producer of a wine called Papantonis in the region of Nemea. I particularly like the way this Agiorgitiko wine ages, becoming soft and complex with time; last winter, in New York, I tasted a spectacularly truffle-y 1995.

Wine Types

Rosé

Holy partial maceration! I'm now of the opinion that Greece is the producer of the most exciting European rosés you can find in the U.S.! Sure, rosé tastes great in the south of France--but for some reason, it rarely tastes as fresh or interesting when it arrives here. Not so for Greek rosés! I tasted a gaggle of 2005s this year, both there and here, and was dazzled by what I found--fresh wines, terrifically fruity, but terrifically dry and refreshing at the same time. My advice: wait until the 2006s start to arrive, then pounce! The two wineries with the best rosé track record in my book are Kir-Yianni (in the north, using Xinomavro grapes), and Semeli (in the south, using Agiorgitiko grapes).

Vinsanto

I know, I know: Tuscany. The Tuscans have grabbed the Vinsanto franchise (re-tooling it as Vin Santo)--but the Santorinians swear that the wine type began with them. History is on Santorini's side--for the production method there goes back to at least 700 BC, and the name goes back at least until the Middle Ages. Frankly, I don't care who owns it....but I do know that the fairly thin, austere, often surprisingly dry Tuscan stuff can be a big, over-hyped disappointment....while the Santorini stuff is one of the wine discoveries of the decade, a rich, brown elixir that lives on the border

between rich, sweet-Sherry kind of wine and rich, late-harvest Riesling kind of wine. Find a bottle from the stellar Vinsanto producer Sigalas, on Santorini, and you will be amazed.

Trackin' 'Em Down

Yes, of course, most of these Greek wines are not available in your friendly local wine shop, the kind of place I call the Chardonnay and Cabernet Emporium. But....you do have recourse. Most every wine mentioned in this article is represented in the U.S. by a dynamic duo from Atlanta, Georgia..... Sofia Perpera and George Athanas. Their company, [All About Greek Wine](#), is dedicated to educating us all about the marvelous wines being made today in Greece. I have asked them if they would mind receiving your e-mails, and they were as gracious as ever. So....if you need some advice on your best retail sources for Greek wines discussed in this article.....please write them at: info@allaboutgreekwine.com