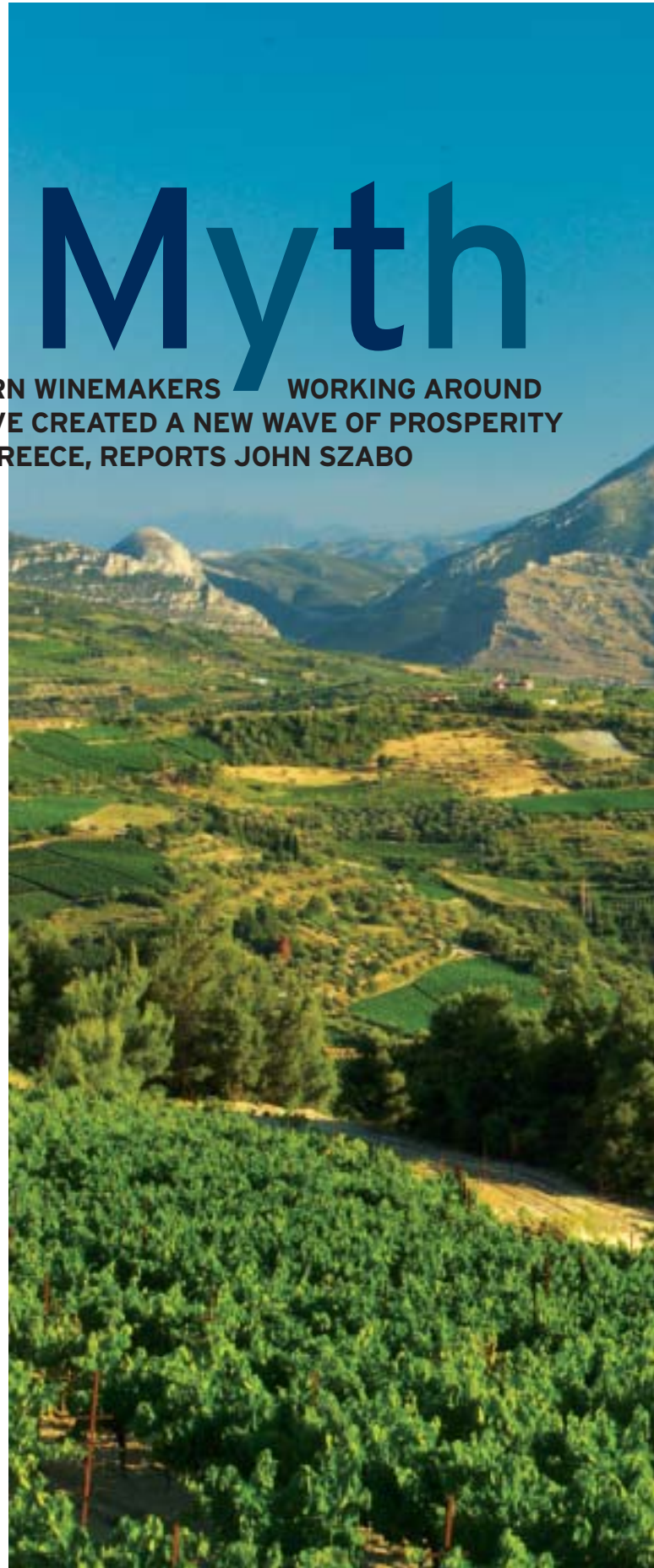




# No Myth

THOROUGHLY MODERN WINEMAKERS WORKING AROUND ANCIENT NEMEA HAVE CREATED A NEW WAVE OF PROSPERITY FOR THE WINES OF GREECE, REPORTS JOHN SZABO



**IT'S HARD NOT TO FEEL THE PULL** of the ages standing just below the cavernous dwelling of the legendary Nemean lion. Surrounding us are the few remaining Doric columns of the Temple of Zeus and some scattered stones that once composed this mighty edifice dedicated to the greatest of Greek gods. This very site, in Ancient Nemea in the Peloponnese, Greece, is where Hercules performed the first of his 12 mythological labours: killing the terrible Lion of Nemea, which had been terrorizing the inhabitants of the ancient city. According to legend, after realizing that his

arrows had no effect on the beast, he strangled it with his bare hands.

Images of this Herculean exploit can be found on dozens of Greek artifacts. The hero is often depicted wearing the lion's impenetrable skin, while enjoying a cup of its blood. Today, the blood of Nemea has a decidedly more contemporary appeal. It comes in the form of wine. But not just any wine; a hearty, rich, smooth red that is as fine as any produced in Greece.

One need not be a wine professional to experience the Greek wine renaissance, nor possess any special level of

The ruins of Ancient Nemea and the undulating hills of the Peloponnese



make for unforgettable scenery.

wine appreciation or inside contacts. The Greek spirit of *kerasma*, of sharing gifts of food and drink with strangers is alive and well in the heart of the ancient world. The craftspeople of these fine wines are awaiting you with open spigots, eager to make known to the outside world the remarkable quality wines that have emerged in the last decade.

It may sound strange that a nation with several thousand years of winemaking experience should only now be enjoying the world spotlight for quality wine production. But you would need to travel far back into antiquity to unearth the last era of Greek wine prosperity.

The Peloponnese was surely one of the first regions in the world to systematically grow grapes for wine, with a recorded history dating back 4,000 years, and an unrecorded one stretching likely several thousand more. These days, sommeliers across North America are catching on to cutting-edge Greek wines, which offer virtually unparalleled diversity and originality, coupled with the killer combination of quality and value.

Nemea sits on the Peloponnese isthmus, a leisurely one and a half hour drive from Athens along the modern four-lane highway built for the 2004 Olympic games. Amazingly, the city's modernized infrastructure belies its multiple millennial history, seamlessly juxtaposing the efficient with the ancient, convenience with timeless beauty. The proximity to Athens makes Nemea an easy day trip, though travellers with more time will want to consider lengthening the journey to include some of the region's other historic sites, wine regions and the finest beaches outside of the islands.

The scenery throughout the Peloponnese is irresistible: Pine and cypress trees dot the skyline of the gently undulating landscape, punctuating neatly tended rows of vines and vast, sweeping olive groves. The Peloponnese produces 35 percent of the country's olive oil (almost six percent of the world total), most of which is the finest grade of extra virgin. Yannis Paraskevopoulos, of Gaia Estate Winery in Nemea, frequently draws parallels between the Peloponnese and Tuscany, referring not only to the landscape but also to the favourable climate and, one suspects, the wine quality.

On your way out of Athens and before crossing into the Peloponnese, be sure to leave the main highway briefly to gaze upon the Corinth Canal. The man-made canal slices through the thin stretch of land that once connected the Peloponnese to mainland Greece, opening up a shipping lane between the Ionian and Adriatic Seas and the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea beyond. It saves seafarers heading east-west a journey of over a thousand kilometres around the Peninsula. This monumental project was first conceived of over 2,500 years ago and finally brought to completion in the late 19th century.

The canal itself is a testament to the gumption of the human spirit, extending over six kilometres and requiring the removal of nearly 12-million cubic metres of earth. It is less than 90 feet wide but several hundred feet deep and is a real sight to behold. The more intrepid are invited to bungee jump into the depths of the Corinth Canal courtesy of [www.zulubungy.com](http://www.zulubungy.com).

About a half-hour after crossing the canal, the highway dips down into the valley that shelters the town of



Domaine Skouras produces striking wines with native grapes like Roditis as well as international varieties Chardonnay and Viognier.



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Nemea, not to be confused with the smaller, older village of Ancient Nemea in the adjoining valley. Here, one gets a sense of the vastness of the wine region, one of Greece's most important red wine-producing zones.

The indigenous variety Agiorgitiko reigns supreme, taking its name, meaning St. George, from the former name of Nemea, Aghios Georgios. This high quality grape reveals a multitude of expressions born of the complex combina-

tion of soil type, slope angle and orientation, and especially the altitude of the vineyards. Grapes grown close to the valley floor exhibit full, fat, sweet fruit characteristics, while those grown at the upper limits of the appellation, nearly 700 metres higher up, reveal a fine acid balance and fresh red berry fruit flavours.

The finest examples of Nemean St. George are fully in line with most modern wine drinker's ideal red wine: a deep purple-red colour, aromas of ripe red raspberries, cherries and plum lifted by sweet baking spices like cinnamon and clove. The taste is soft and plush like crushed velvet; it is full-bodied, satisfying, even charming. It has none of the angular characteristics that deter the neophytes, while retaining enough backbone and complexity to seduce the most experienced palates. The grape has a great affinity for aging in oak barrels, further adding to its appeal.

Gaia Wines (pronounced yea - ah) is one of the growing specialists in the region producing world-class wines. The winery is a joint venture between viticulturalist Leon Karatsalos and Yiannis Paraskevopoulos, oenology professor at the Athens Technical Education Institute. The pair had already joined forces in 1994 on the Island of Santorini, where they make one of Greece's most impressive whites from the excellent Assyrtico variety.

Their search for a great red wine terroir led them to Nemea in 1997 to the commune of Koutsis, which in the opinion of many will be recognized as one of the top crus of Nemea in time. The superb Gaia Estate Nemea, produced from old vineyards at the ideal altitude of around 550 metres, reveals the deft touch of wine-



making genius, not surprising given Paraskevopoulos's technical background.

Despite the already impressive results, he believes that the best is yet to come. "We are where Tuscany was with Chianti 20 years ago," he says, continuing his earlier analogy. "We still have many years of work ahead of us when it comes to finding the right clones, irrigation schemes and vine balance."

When the duo purchased the vineyards, their first move was to prune the vines to yield much lower amounts of fruits. The locals thought the pair were crazy to lower their production. Paraskevopoulos remembers with a chuckle one local winegrower who even approached them to warn that low-yielding Agiorgitiko would produce "nearly black, tannic wine, far too concentrated." The partners knew that had chosen the right place.

Stylistically different but equally compelling are the wines of a Nemean winegrowing veteran named Thanassis Papaioannou. The estate, situated in the village of Ancient Nemea, was among the first of

Greece's new wave of quality wine producers and the wines are even more impressive today.

Curiously, Thanassis had no winemaking background before establishing his winery over 20 years ago, although he had plenty of grape growing experience. His son George would later provide the technical winemaking expertise, after completing an oenology degree.

The strength of the winery, however, lies in its parcels of organically farmed vineyards scattered throughout the appellation, the crowning jewel of which is a small plot of ancient 70-plus-year-old Agiorgitiko vines from which the outstanding Mikroklima Nemea is produced. This concentrated, dense, substantial wine, with great aging potential, verges on Amarone-like richness and raisined fruit character.

In addition to the outstanding range of Nemeas (including a delicious rosé), many unusual, experimental wines are produced, showing that the Papaioannous family are still pushing the envelope. Several of the indigenous-international

## Tasting Notes

★★★★☆

**A. and G. Papaioannou Vineyards 2003 Agiorgitiko Papaioannou Estate Nemea \$18.95** Papaioannou (pronounced Pah-pigh-yoh-ah-noon) is the name of the producer. Agiorgitiko (also called Saint George) is the grape. This single-vineyard model presents raspberry, spice and flower aromatics at first on the nose, with underlying earth, leather and chocolate notes. It is a full-bodied red with muscular tannins, which is extremely well-made and will benefit from bottle age. (ZS)

★★★★

**Domaine Skouras 2005 Cuvée Prestige White Nemea \$12.95** This provocative dry white is produced from the indigenous Moschofilero and Roditis grapes; Skouras also produces expressive whites from international varieties like Chardonnay and Viognier. Expect aromas of citrus, stone fruit, white flowers and mineral followed by a medium weight palate that reveals an interesting pink grapefruit character. The wine possesses great acidity, which makes it an ideal match for grilled or stuffed squid. (ZS)

★★★★

**Ktima Pavlidis 2004 Red Drama, Greece \$21.95** Drama, located in the north eastern corner of Greece, is one of the most traditional grape growing and winemaking regions of Greece due to its unique soil and climate conditions. The Ktima Pavlidis winery is a state-of-the-art facility owned by "marble king" Christoforos Pavlidis, in a stunning setting majestically surrounded by Mount Falakro, near the famous Angitis Cave. This dry red is produced from Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and funky Limnio. Ruby red, and reveals striking aromas of red and black stewed fruit, musk and herbs. A medium-bodied wine showcases obvious acidity, youthful tannins and a hot finish. It is made accurately, showing great winemaking expertise, rather than terroir. Try with lamb chops. (ZS)

★★★★☆

**Gaia Wines 2005 Notios White Nemea \$13.50** Notios, meaning "of the South" or "The Southerner," is a blend of Moschofilero and Roditis. The grapes are vinified separately before blending, producing a light-coloured wine with grapey and floral aromas, accented with some melon, mineral and spicy notes. A light-bodied white with a mere hint of sweetness, the palate is very fresh with gooseberry flavours and a zesty, mineral finish. This would be great with grilled calamari with a dash of lemon juice. [steve.kriaris@kolonakigroup.com](mailto:steve.kriaris@kolonakigroup.com) (ZS)

### IF YOU GO:

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**Papaioannou Winery** Ancient Nemea, Corinthia, Greece GR 20500 Athens office: +30 (210) 285-2903 Winery: +30 (274) 602-3138 Email: [intervino@otenet.gr](mailto:intervino@otenet.gr)

**Domaine Skouras** 10th Km Argos-Sterna, Malandreni, Argos, Greece GR 21200 Athens office: +30 (210) 934-9155 Winery: +30 (275) 102-3688 Email: [Skouras@hol.gr](mailto:Skouras@hol.gr), [www.skouraswines.com](http://www.skouraswines.com)

All wineries are open by appointment. For general information on Greek Wines, visit [www.allaboutgreekwine.com](http://www.allaboutgreekwine.com).



The picturesque rolling hills draw comparisons to Tuscany.

variety blends reveal sleek, modern styling, such as the fresh, highly aromatic Sauvignon Blanc-Malagousia white blend, and the Sauvignon-Roditis, the latter grape referred to by George as the Greek Chardonnay. Even Pinot Noir is being attempted, though the results so far will not alarm the Burgundians as yet.

The new winery of the irrepressible George Skouras sits on the edge of the Nemea appellation. Skouras is gregarious and affable, an ideal ambassador for Greek wines. He slips seamlessly between Greek, English and French, revealing not a little Francophilia in his speech, choice of grape varieties, barrels (ordered directly from his friend Marcel Guigal in the Rhône Valley) and wine names. But he has not abandoned his roots. Chardonnay and Viognier are produced alongside native grapes Moschofilero and Roditis, Cabernet and Merlot thrive alongside St. George.

Skouras runs an ongoing research project into soils, clones and rootstocks, forever seeking the best possible combinations. In his own words, "fruit is privileged above all else." These are indeed clean, fruity wines, decidedly firm and stylish and generally excel-

lent value. His top wine is the ambitiously named Megas Oinos (Great Wine), a blend of mostly old vine St. George with some Cabernet Sauvignon. It is much more Old World in style than the entry-level cuvée prestige line, described by Skouras as being Michelle Pfeiffer-like (compared to the Arnold Schwarzenegger-like Grande Cuvée).

Whatever your preference, the winery promises to be a Mecca for wine tourists to the Peloponnese. It is an impressive modern facility that provides an ideal stage for Skouras's entertaining character, complete with tasting rooms overlooking the vineyards and a demonstration kitchen for mega meals.

The wines of Nemea look clearly set to lead Greece's export drive, having already won over discerning palates around the world. It's somehow only fitting that a local vine from this ancient land should yield the juice to take Greece into the 21st century. Huddled on the steps of this ancient temple, we reflect on Greek wine's glorious past, present and future as we sip a goblet of the new blood of Nemea under the watchful eye of the lion itself, forever immortalized in the stars as the constellation Leo.