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PRODUCT OF GREECE
SANTORINI

Old World

From ancient roots, GREECE is producing the next big tastes in wine.

Story by RUTH TOBIAS   Photos by LARA FERRONI

When it comes to wine, the old cliché "It's Greek to me" still resonates—most of us stateside could polish off a glass of Moschofilero or Agiorgitiko in half the time it takes us to spit out the name of the grape.

But we'd better learn, quick. (For the record, it's mohs-koh-FEE-leh-ro and eye-yore-EE-tee-koh.) Because after a few centuries' lull, the wines of Greece are primed for a major comeback. As Ohio-based master sommelier and wine educator Matthew Citriglia puts it, "If Greek wines are being sold in Columbus, they're being sold all over the U.S."

Although the average all-purpose liquor retailer may only carry the random bottle of mass-produced, semi-sweet Greek table wine, serious wine shops everywhere are beginning to stock high-quality (but still reasonably priced) labels, like Alpha Estate, Domaine Sigalas, Domaine Skouras and Domaine Gerovassiliou; so are savvy restaurateurs like Telly Topakas of Axios Estiatorio in Denver, Colorado. Thanks to the newly concerted efforts of a handful of U.S. importers and consulting groups like All About Greek Wine—who have helped increase U.S. import levels by as much as 12% in five years—anyone with a reasonable amount of interest doesn't have to do much digging to unearth a trove of distinctive Greek wines, and to develop an understanding of the culture that produces them.

ANCIENT ROOTS

As with so much else in modern civilization, the ancient Greeks were, if not the first to make wine, certainly among the first (along with the Phoenicians) to plant vines and spread their knowledge of viticulture across many parts of what is now modern Europe. As Citriglia notes, "The lineage of Greece's native vines is among the oldest in the world; its grapes may well be the ancestors of many of the world's best-known varietals."

Adds Athens-based master of wine Konstantinos Lazarakis, author of *The Wines of Greece*, "Greeks were the first to develop wine appellations that were quite close to what we have today. They identified three or four regions that were developing very specific wines from specific grapes. They had to use specific vessels. They had to obtain seals of authenticity before the wines could be sold. This was in the fifth, sixth century BC."

What's more, he says, Greeks developed a culture around consuming wine. "The first wine writers were Greek; the first sommeliers were Greek—the *oenohooi* were the ones pouring the wine at symposia. They were choosing the correct clay vessels for drinking wine out of. Even in those days, they were aware that different glass shapes worked for some wines but not for others. And they were responsible not just for serving wine but for conducting the conversation and controlling the atmosphere of the whole symposium."

In Greece, as in the rest of Mediterranean Europe, wine remains central to everyday life. "It's almost unheard of to meet people in a relaxed setting without wine and some nibbles," says Lazarakis, "The vast majority of wines have been evolving in a style that really complements food. With a glass of wine for what you call happy hour, maybe you have a couple of olives, a few wedges of fresh tomato, a few roasted potatoes. You can have a grand feast out of just a few key things. A loaf of great bread, great tomato, nice cheese, olive oil, oregano, a little coarse salt, and that's it."

Why, then, the relatively minor role of Greece on the world stage of modern wine? The short answer is that centuries of political turmoil exacted a heavy toll on viticulture. From the mid-15th century to the revolution of 1821, Ottoman imperial rule discouraged commercial winemaking by imposing prohibitive taxes on all but wine-producing monasteries; upon winning independence, the destitute nation was quickly embroiled in both regional and world wars. "If you move forward from the fourth century BC, the next time Greeks were optimistic and looking ahead, it was maybe the 1950s," says Lazarakis. "And in order to have a wine industry developing at the top level, you must have some wealthy segments of society that can invest in it."

Not until the mid-1990s, Lazarakis estimates, did intrepid winemakers like Kir-Yianni founder Yiannis Boutaris and Domaine Gerovassiliou's Vangelis Gerovassiliou begin to usher in a new era of world-class production. The work has paid off—sales of Greek wine in the U.S. increased by over $1 million between 2001 and 2010, to $8.68 million, according to Eurostat.

THE WINES

That's not to imply that Greeks have been looking to the rest of the world, Old or New, as an industry model. Although technology-driven modernization and outside influence (vis-à-vis, say, the introduction of international grapes) are part of the picture, they're a minor and much less compelling part; what's fascinating about Greek winemaking today is the extent to which its ancient, hyperlocal roots still show and preservation efforts trump radical experimentation.

That's partly a function of the landscape; between the mountains and the hot, windy islands—where, as Topakas puts it, "300 indigenous varieties have been adapting to microclimates for 3,000 years"—the conditions are such that vineyards tend to be small and difficult to cultivate, requiring primarily age-old methods, such as harvesting by hand. Thus, within some 33 protected designations of origin (PDOs), small-scale production is still the norm—which means that we in the United States are getting only the tiniest taste of Greece's diverse wines to date. For starters, Citriglia is pinning his hopes on four key varietals as "the building blocks for talking about Greek wine."

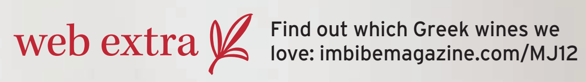
ASSYRTIKO

Greece's best-known white grape is being planted throughout the country, but the island of Santorini is where it shows best, says Citriglia. "Visiting it, you can't believe they grow grapes there—there's no rain, and the wind is constant," he says. "The first vineyard I walked into, I didn't even know it was a vineyard." That's because, on Santorini, the vines are trained—as they have been for millennia—to grow close to the volcanic soil in coils called *koulouras*, *stefanis* or *ampelies*, meaning "coils," "crowns" and "vines," respectively. While protecting the buds from the intense sun and high winds, the leafy coils absorb the moisture in the island fog and bring it to the roots of the vine. "And what you get are these tiny berries with very high levels of dry extract," says Citriglia. "When you put them in your mouth, there's a weight and a density that you rarely find in white wines. They age impeccably—some for 18, 19 years."

Indeed, Citriglia likens Assyrtiko to a high-quality Chablis meeting a dry grand cru Riesling. "When you drink Chablis, there's a limestone and chalk element," he says. "With Riesling, it's slate from the Mosel. And when you drink Assyrtiko, there's an incredible volcanic minerality."

That sentiment is echoed by every fan of this pale-yellow wine. Topakas, who credits Santorini's "passionate, hell-bent winemakers" with resisting pressure from the island's tourist industry to sell their land, notes that "Assyrtiko is not about fruit at all—it's all about weight and texture."

Sofia Perpera—enologist and director, with husband George Athanas, of All About Greek Wine—agrees. "It's only slightly aromatic—there's a light, citrusy aroma and that's it. But of all the Mediterranean grapes, this one has the ability to retain high levels of sugar and acidity at the same time. What you look for in Assyrtiko is great, full body, great acidity and great minerality." Drink it with oysters or grilled shellfish.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Find out which Greek wines we love: imbibemagazine.com/MJ12

MOSCHOFILERO

Primarily associated with Mantinia—which is situated at a relatively high elevation in the Peloponnese—Moschofilero yields another useful comparison, says Citriglia. "I like referring it to it as Pinot Grigio meets Viognier—the crispness and tartness of the former combined with the fragrant, floral quality of the latter," he says. "At about 1,500 to 2,000 feet, the cool air and rocky soil give it a distinctive freshness."

However, in the hotter vintages Topakas says you get better aromatics, such as white flowers, apricot and honeysuckle, but the wine is still dry on the palate. These qualities lend themselves to sparkling as well as still wines. Perpera recommends Moschofilero as an aperitif or a match for Asian food, though a buoyantly acidic Moschofilero will perfectly slice through the richness of spanakopita.

AGIORGITIKO

Also known as St. George, this red grape shines in the Peloponnese PDO of Nemea. For the newcomer to Greek wines, it's a great starting point, says Perpera, because it's more of a crowd pleaser with its fresh red fruit flavors and soft tannins. "It can be nicely chilled and delightful with fish as well as meat," he says.

Which isn't to say it's simplistic. In fact, Agiorgitiko can produce everything from crisp, clean, slightly mineral rosés to reds whose versatility, in Topakas's view, might align them with Sangiovese, "mushroomy" Châteauneuf-du-Pape, or even "big-boy Montalcinos," depending on their age. Such range reflects the terroir. Citriglia recalls touring a Nemea vineyard that went straight up, from 400 meters to 900. "You could see the soil change from red marl to pure white limestone, and as you ate the grapes, you could taste the difference," he says. "They were much more tannic at the low end, tart at the high end."

Still, he agrees with Topakas that Americans with even a passing knowledge of Italy's higher-acid grapes, like Nebbiolo and Barbera, are ready for Agiorgitiko's combination of floral and herbal elements. Think savory cooking herbs, rose petal and violet, as well as more expected cherry, blueberry, and even mulberry and cranberry notes. Drink it with lemony grilled fish, game meats or pasta.

XINOMAVRO

With a name that translates as "acid-black," Xinomavro is, admittedly, a tricky proposition—but all the more exciting for that. Predominant in northern PDOs like Amyndeon and Naoussa—which Topakas enthusiastically credits with "the potential to be like a Barolo"—this red grape, depending on its provenance and vinification, shows some cherry and strawberry characteristics, but at its most intriguing, it's rich in nonfruity notes: smoke, earth, leather, cinnamon and pepper.

As the name suggests, Xinomavro boasts its share of acid, generally well balanced by a fair amount of tannin. And, says Perpera, "as it ages, it gets a very complex bouquet that includes olives and dried tomatoes." Drink it with moussaka (a baked eggplant dish) or roasted leg of lamb.

OTHER GRAPES

The aforementioned varietals are just a few of Greece's fascinating wines. Malagousia is another notable grape revived from near-extinction to produce fuller-bodied whites known for hints of tropical and citrus fruits. There's also white Muscat, which in Greek soil produces both dry and sweet wines. White Muscats, particularly from Samos, can be like drinking baklava. And Mavrodaphne is known for the ruby Port–like dessert wines it produces. The list goes on, from white Robola and Roditis to red Mandelaria and Limnio, which Lazarakis pegs as "the next Xinomavro or Agiorgitiko."

Greece's winemakers are still making up for lost time—and Americans are only just beginning to appreciate the fruits of their efforts. As Citriglia observes, "Greece has phenomenal fruit, old vines and new technology; they still need experience in determining what to do with it all, but their visions of the future are very big." ■

RETSINA: THE ULTIMATE ACQUIRED TASTE?

Most people have an immediate, visceral—and thereafter unyielding—love for or revulsion to retsina, the resinated wine that the people of Greece have been drinking, according to most estimates, for some 2,000 years.

What's to love? Partly, the historical romance that surrounds the style, which has its origins in the ancient practice of sealing the *amphorae* (or clay wine jars) with Aleppo pine resin. But its fans also genuinely like the decidedly funky aromas and flavors in a glass of well-made retsina: here medicinal notes, there flower buds sprouting from fresh dirt, and everywhere lots of lemon and pine needle.

The problem is that the market was, for much of the 20th century, saturated with cheaply produced retsina—and that, admits Konstaninos Lazarakis, "can be horrible. But you can also find lovely versions, the equivalents of Spain's fino sherry."

Retsina has long had a role to play on the traditional Greek table, where, Lazarakis explains, "you have lots of small nibbles at the same time—fried cheese, shrimp casserole, oysters—so the old-style food-and-wine matching theories go out the window, and what you need is a strong, flavorful wine that will clean your palate." (Sofia Perpera adds that it's fabulous with Indian food as well.)

Made primarily around Attica with the Savatiano grape—and, sometimes, lesser amounts of Roditis and even Assyrtiko—retsina is worth a try. Look particularly for the Kourtaki label, which Topakas deems among the most consistent.