

# Greek Wines Exposed

With a little help from this year's Olympic games in Athens, a much needed spotlight will shine on Greece's mysterious yet remarkable wines.

*Lisa Shara Hall*

Greek wines may soon enjoy a renaissance of publicity and availability. The recent Olympics coupled with emerging wine quality will hopefully help give these remarkable wines some much-needed exposure and promotion. With unknown varieties and regions, Greek wines have been a mystery to many. Retsina is not at all representative of the exciting wines now being produced in Greece.

Greek wines are virtually unknown in the US. Unfortunately, they tend to appear only on the menus of Greek restaurants, but they have strong adaptability to a world of cuisines. Greek wine varieties and regions are totally unfamiliar to most wine drinkers, and knowing how to pronounce the difficult names can be a major challenge as well.

## The Indigenous White Varieties

Indigenous grapes are outstanding in Greece. The flavors are different but delicious and a major surprise once you discover them. These unknown but tasty varieties are really what Greek wines are all about.

While traditional varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and Chardonnay are also planted and often blended with indigenous varieties such as Assyrtiko, that is the exception, not, thankfully, the standard. What follows is a guide to Greek grapes and how to pronounce them.

Assyrtiko (a SEER tee ko) is a fine multi-purpose variety, maintaining its acidity as it ripens. Similar in character to Riesling, Assyrtiko can be vinified in a range of styles as well. This mostly island-based grape is classic in sweet Vinsanto from Santorini and fruity dry wines from Macedonia and Attica (the region surrounding Athens). Santorini producer Sigalas Wines sets the standard for this variety, producing classic unoaked wines as well as oaked versions, and Vinsantos, of course. Gaia Estate in the Peloponnese region also

produces a delicious Assyrtiko from Santorini. Biblia Chora, in the northern Macedonia region near Thessalonkia, blends Santorini Assyrtiko with Sauvignon Blanc to create a mineral, well-balanced wine. Domaine Evharis grows Assyrtiko on an estate near the Gerania Mountains between Athens and Corinth, to good results as well, which it blends with Chardonnay in one cuveé and bottles it alone in another.

Athiri (ah THEE ree) is a lower acid variety and one of the most ancient. Originally from Santorini, it is now planted in Macedonia, Attica and Rhodes. Athiri grapes have a thin skin and give sweet, fruity juice. It produces wines that are slightly aromatic, having medium alcoholic content. Athiri is a common sight on Rhodes where producer Emery only makes Athiri whites, and they claim a fine mineral-laden and floral character.

Lagorhi (la GOR thee): Since its revival, this variety is cultivated mainly on high slopes (850 meters) by the Oenoforos Winery in the Peloponnese. The grape produces a very malic and fruity wine, and Oenoforos also gives it some lees contact and micro-oxygenation to broaden the palate.

Malagousia (mah lah gou ZYA): The Domaine Gerovassiliou winery was the first to begin experimenting with the nearly extinct grape, now found mainly in Macedonia. It is an especially aromatic grape leading to elegant full-bodied wines, with medium-plus acidity and exciting perfumed aromas of exotic fruits, citrus (especially lime) and mint.

Moschofilero (mos ko FEE le ro) is a distinct aromatic and floral variety from the AOC region of Mantinia, in the Peloponnese. The grapes sport a gray cast, and its wines offer a crisp and floral character. The Domaine Spiropoulos winery produces a particularly fine, slightly malic version from organically cultivated vines that is very floral, with a bit of a phenolic character

due to skin contact. Gai'a Estate also blends this successfully with Roditis.

Robola (ro BO la) is mostly grown in the mountainous vineyards of Cephalonia and claims a smoky mineral character. Cephalonian producer Gentilini's lovely Robola offers a broad chalky concentration.

Roditis (ro DEE tees) is very popular in Attica, Macedonia, Thessaly and the Peloponnese, where it is cultivated for the production of light AOC Patra wines. As the name implies, Roditis is pale pink color and produces the best results when cultivated with low yields on mountainous slopes. Roditis can produce elegant, light white wines with citrus flavors. Skouras Estate in the Peloponnese, the ubiquitous Boutari and many others make both pale and rosé wines from this popular variety.

Savatiano (sa va tya NO) is the predominant grape in the region of Attica where it displays excellent heat resistance and shows a distinct floral and fruity aroma. The grape is low in acid, often giving the wines a flabby character lacking in nerve. Domaine G. Kokotos makes a pleasant version. Savatiano can be made into a rosé as well. It is also the base grape for Retsina, which has the additional flavors of resin or pine; you either love it or hate it.

## The Indigenous Red Varieties

Greek reds show distinctly different flavors from the "noble" reds we westerners are used to drinking.

Agiorghitiko (ah yor YEE ti ko): Meaning "St. George's," this variety is grown mainly in the AOC Nemea in the Peloponnese, producing a soft, sometimes fruity red in many styles. There are a number of quality leaders for this variety, including Domaine Gerovassiliou, Papanonis Winery, Gai'a Estate and Skouras Estate, with his Megas Oenos bottling in particular. Domaine Spiropoulos blends the

variety with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to produce a spicy, firm wine.

Xinomavro (tzee NO ma vro): Meaning "acid black," this is the predominant grape variety in the Macedonia area, the northern grape growing part of Greece encompassing a number of separate regions. It shows superb aging potential with rich, tannic character. Xinomavro is often compared to Nebbiolo with its great capacity for aging. Top producers of this grape include Ktima Kir Yianni, the newish (1997) winery of former Boutari partner Yianni Boutari and his talented sons (Boutari first planted this variety in 1960), the biodynamic Alpha Estate (which is also doing wonders blending Xinomavro with Merlot and Syrah), and Ktima Pavlidis who also blends in other varieties. The older, somewhat commercial firm of Boutari also makes excellent Xinomavro, both clearly varietal and a Merlot-blended cuveé. Katogi-Strofilia produces a lovely blend of Agiorghitiko and Xinomavro, too. And Kir Yianni and Oenoforos together produce a terrific blend of Xinomavro and Cabernet Sauvignon called "Janos."

Mandelaria (mahn dee la RYA) is also known as "Amorgiano." It is mainly cultivated on the islands of Rhodes and Crete. Wine from this grape is often very tannic and frequently blended with other grapes to soften the mouth feel. Sigalas produces a tasty and interesting dessert wine called "Mezzo" by semi-drying the grapes prior to fermentation.

Mavrodaphne (ma vro THAF nee): "Black laurel" is found in the Peloponnese as well as the Ionian Islands. It is blended with the Korinthiaki grape to produce a fortified dessert wine known as "Mavrodaphne." "Mercuri Estate produces a sweet Mavrodaphne, as well as a blend of estate-grown Refosco (an Italian variety) and Mavrodaphne. The Refosco gives the wine its color and

body while the Mavrodaphne contributes the complexity of aroma.

### Noble Varieties Succeed as Well

Amazingly, there are 300 different varieties under cultivation in Greece. They aren't all of Greek origin, however. As mentioned earlier, Greece has a fair amount of acreage under cultivation with noble varieties.

Among the single white varieties, Riesling, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc stand out. Oenoforos does particularly well with Riesling, producing a mineral, round wine with a good backbone of acidity. Its barrel-fermented Chardonnay also shows beautifully. Alpha Estate in the north makes a concentrated, fresh Sauvignon Blanc laced with a mineral thread throughout the wine. As mentioned above, Biblia Chora's blends of Sauvignon Blanc and Assyrtico are particularly successful, as is its Chardonnay. And Skouras makes a Viognier that sports strong acidity and good varietal character.

In reds, there seems to be a lot of promise for blending the noble varieties with the indigenous ones as well as for stand-alone varietals. Domaine Tselepos in the Peloponnese makes a very fine Merlot, which was a prizewinner at a spring competition in Philadelphia; a modern, rich Cabernet Sauvignon and a fruity, dense blend of the two. Mercouri Estate produces a delicious blend of the obscure Avgoustiatis (meaning "August-ripening") grape with Mourvèdre; the resulting wine speaks more of the Rhone than anywhere else. Domaine Porto Carras makes a number of fine Cabernet blends.

Syrah seems to be the new darling in Greece just as it is in the United States. Such diversely located producers as Oenoforos in the Peloponnese, Gentilini in Cephalonia, Alpha Estate and Gerovassiliou in the north, and Porto Carras (based in Athens), have been seduced by Syrah, all with very good results.

Greek wines deserve more exposure because they offer both high quality as well as reasonable pricing. Exciting different varieties mean that Greece is more than "business as usual." More and more of the wines are available in the United States, and more of them deserve to be. With luck, the Olympic spotlight will make people more aware

of what this ancient historic nation can do with wine. And who knows, maybe many of these unusual varieties could grow very well here in the United States. wbm

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