

GREEK WINES REVISITED

by Laura Holmes Haddad

It was only a few years ago that most Americans equated Greek wine with low-quality blends and pine-scented retsina, but winemakers have changed course in the past ten years, producing high-quality wines that are changing the face of the Greek wine industry.



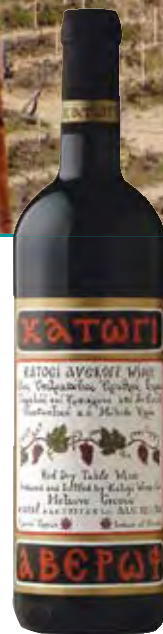
Moschofilero is an aromatic grape with flavors of rose, melon, and citrus; grown primarily in Mantinia in the Peloponnese region.

Wine is certainly nothing new to Greece, where the first vines were planted 4,000 years ago. With 300 days of sun, low average rainfall, varied soils, and the proximity to the sea—you're never more than two hours from the water at any point in Greece—viticulture flourishes. The 500 wineries in this mountainous country produce wine from ten regions, ranging from the snowy mountains of Macedonia in the north to the sun-drenched islands of the southern Aegean.

White wines were traditionally the backbone of the Greek wine industry, making up 40% of production, but in the past ten years the reds have caught up. International varietals, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Merlot, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Viognier, are being planted alongside the more than 300 indigenous varietals. Both indigenous and international varietals are being made into fresh and lively rosés, while late harvest and fortified wines made from Muscat and Mavrodaphne varietals are some of the best value sweet wines in the world.

The best-known Greek producers include Boutari, Domaine Gerovassiliou, Evharris, Gaia Estate, Sigalas, and Tsantali. Other notable estates include Biblia Chora, started by Evangelos Gerovassiliou and Vassilis Tsaktsarlis, focusing on organic wines in Macedonia, and Katogi Strofilia in Macedonia that produces excellent reds, whites, and rosé; the intense, earthy Xinomavro and crisp, floral Traminer are particularly impressive. Alpha Estate released their first wine in 2004 and winemaker Angelos Iatridis is garnering high praise for the signature Syrah, Merlot, and Xinomavro blend.

Translating these wines—both literally and figuratively—to the U.S. market has been a challenge. With unknown, hard-to-pronounce grape varietals and wine regions,



Greek labels can be colorful but are sometimes confusing to consumers.

limited distribution, and relatively high prices, Greek wines have faced an uphill battle. Importers and distributors throughout the U.S. point out the need for hand-selling, as well as the lack of distribution channels for the 220,000 cases imported every year.

While consumer education has expanded, prices are unlikely to drop due to the fact that most of the grapes are grown in very small plots with low yields and requiring hand labor.

Restaurants, both Greek and non-Greek, have served as ambassadors of Greek wine, accounting for about 75 percent of the market. Wine directors and sommeliers consistently point to the food-friendly qualities and relative value of Greece's indigenous varietals. Beth von Benz, Wine Director at Porter House New York in Manhattan, and former wine director at Milos and Judson Grill, notes the increased availability of high-quality Greek wines in the

past five years. "At Milos I had 42 great Greek wines but now you could have 100," she says. For other restaurants this has created the opposite effect. "It's become tougher for us to access the high-quality wines that were once easily available," says Paul Kirby, General Manager and Wine Director at Kokkari Estiatorio, a Greek restaurant in San Francisco that opened in 1998. "For us on the West Coast it can be more of a challenge to get the wines because of the high cost of shipping."

George Miliones, Director of Beverage and Hospitality for Seasons 52, a restaurant with seven locations in Florida and Georgia, recently added four Greek wines to his 100-plus bottle wine list for the first time. "While people love Chardonnay and Merlot and will continue to do so, I think there's a sector that looks for what's different," says Miliones. "That's the strength of the Greek wine industry. They didn't clean up their act with Chardonnay and Merlot but rather with interesting indigenous varietals. I don't carry 'regular' varietals from Greece; why would I?"



The vineyards at Porto Carras have stunning views of the Aegean Sea.

Encouraging customers to try Greek wines requires some ingenuity, particularly at non-Greek restaurants. Von Benz has utilized several strategies, from serving Greek selections by the glass to creating a particular section on the wine list. "You have to find a niche for it," she says. "I had a value page on my wine list with Greek wines and people were willing to take a chance because it was less expensive."

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The recent emphasis on quality has shown that Greek wines can hold their own on the world wine stage. The next steps are expanded distribution and continued consumer education in order to secure a larger share of the U.S. market.



Evangelos Gerovassiliou, of Domaine Gerovassiliou in Macedonia, is considered the "father" of the Malagousia varietal.

THE MAJOR INDIGENOUS VARIETALS OF GREECE

Reds

Agiorgitiko

(ah-your-EE-tee-koe)

Spicy, cherry and plum flavored wine with deep, dark color and soft tannins.

Limnio (LIM-nee-oh)

Herbaceous, full-bodied wine with medium acidity and high alcohol.

Mavrodaphne

(mav-ro-DAF-nee)

Used primarily to make sweet, Port-like wines.

Xinomavro (zee-no-MAV-roe)

Similar to Nebbiolo, a temperamental varietal producing earthy wines with flavors of raspberry and black olives.

Whites

Assyrtiko (ah-SEER-tee-koe)

Crisp, dry wines with flavors of citrus and honeysuckle.

Malagousia (mal-GOO-zee-ya)

Citrus and floral wines with nice acidity. Evangelos Gerovassiliou in Macedonia is considered the "father" of this varietal.

Moschofilero

(mos-koe-FEEL-ee-roe)

Aromatic grape with flavors of rose, melon, and citrus.

Roditis (roe-DEE-tees)

Pink-skinned grape; wines show hints of citrus and a creamy finish.