

SEEKING SANTORINI

Not long ago, Greek wine was a joke. Now it's high in the desirability stakes around the world, and white wines from the postcard island of Santorini are must-show for leading sommeliers in the United States.

JEAN K. REILLY charts the unlikely rise of Assyrtiko and friends.



Far left: A Greek orthodox church overlooks the Aegean Sea at Oia, Santorini. This page: Vineyard at Moni Gonia Monastery in Kolymvari, Crete (top left), where new wineries are now turning out world-class wines. The evocative appeal of Santorini and its volcanic soil (bottom right) has led to its wines becoming staples in New York restaurants Molyvos (top right) and Boulud Sud (bottom left)

My love affair with Greek wine began illegally. Sort of. Aged 19, a good two years before I would have been allowed to drink legally at home in New York, I moved to Paris. Freed from puritanical restrictions on alcohol consumption, I threw myself into discovering the world's wines. One fine spring day, I found myself in a Greek restaurant with some fellow students. My friend's boyfriend scanned the wine list and ordered a bottle of Greek wine with all the confidence of a man who knows the best wines in every corner of the world – at the tender age of 23. He chose a Santorini, a wine made on the eponymous island, from the Assyrtiko grape. It was imposing, mysterious and approachable all at the same time. It seemed to be the ultimate accompaniment to both sunshine and shellfish; suddenly, I was in love.

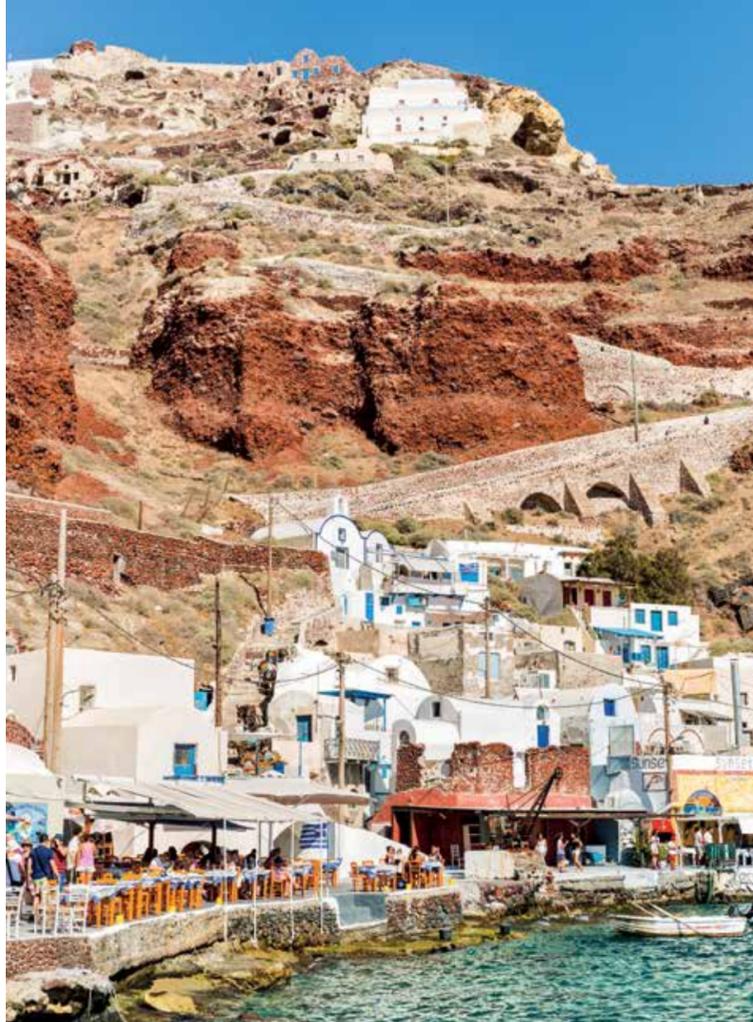
When I returned to the United States, my affair moved from being illegal to covert. I took a 1994 Santorini from Domaine Sigalas to a swanky dinner party in New York and proudly presented it to the hostess. She looked at me in horror and proceeded to recount a long tale of how 'pine-flavored' Greek wines had made her sick on her vacation in Athens. I returned home with the offending bottle and promptly discarded it at the back of my closet. A number of years later, I came across the much-maligned bottle while preparing to move apartment, and decided to crack it open. It was nothing short of awesome, having mellowed into a rich elixir with all the sexy texture of Chardonnay layered onto the nervy energy of Riesling. I felt vindicated and emboldened to take my furtive love affair out of the closet.

By that time – the late 1990s – the Greek wine scene in the US was already starting to change. In 1997, upscale restaurant Molyvos opened in Manhattan showcasing a heavily Greek wine list. It was quickly given an estimable three-star rating by *The New York Times*, the first restaurant outside the standard French-Italian circle to merit the honor. The city took a collective gasp. The same year, the Spiliadis family opened a New York branch of Milos, their high-end Greek restaurant in Montreal, which

Top: Santorini's tourist appeal helped to promote its wines internationally
Right and far right: New York has led Greek wine's charge onto the world stage, with Milos restaurant drawing celebrities including (clockwise from top) chef José Andrés, socialites Vanessa and Ivanka Trump, and actor Rupert Friend

The Ups and Downs of Santorini

As any visitor to Santorini will recall, the island is not a bed of roses. It was born in an ancient volcanic eruption so violent that it wiped out the Minoan civilization in one fell swoop. Soils are poor and often black, devoid of even the most basic of nutrients. Meanwhile, the vineyards are subject to gusts so forceful that viticulturists train the vines to coil around themselves in order to avoid being blown into the sea. It is exactly this life-and-death struggle of the vine that fills the wines with nuance and character, however. The rugged cliffs, the vineyards battered by ocean spray and the craggy coastline overlooking the Aegean Sea can all be sensed in a glass of minerally Santorini.



packed in the city's glitterati despite being one of the most pricey dining spots in a city known for its over-the-top restaurant tabs. I was enthralled with the food at these establishments, but I was even more intrigued by the wine. My relationship went from covert to public, and from monogamous to polyamorous, as the well-trained sommeliers introduced me to a slew of new grape varieties. Always a bit of a white-wine girl, I developed strong attachments to Malagousia, Savatiano and Moschofilero, though Assyrtiko continued to have the strongest hold on my affections.

I was no longer alone in my unorthodox preferences, though. Following hot on the heels of the runaway success of Milos and Molyvos, a slew of high-end Greek establishments sprang up in New York, again with a strong emphasis on native wines. They were followed by an even larger wave of Mediterranean restaurants that introduced Greek wines to a much broader audience. Michael Madrigale, head sommelier of the most well-known restaurant of this ilk, Daniel Boulud's Boulud Sud, believes the increased attention in the press was a significant factor in changing wine drinkers' attitudes. "It used to be that when you suggested a Greek wine, diners would look like you just stepped on their foot. Now they're like, 'Sure, I've read about it, I've heard about it.' They're totally open to it." With so many of the top tastemakers urging them on, consumers started to fall prey to the seductive wiles of Greek whites.

Today, almost 20 years after Molyvos' groundbreaking opening, New York is still the biggest center of Greek wine appreciation outside Athens, although a host of other cities are starting to follow its lead. John Szabo, a Canadian Master Sommelier and author of an upcoming book on volcanic wines, believes the restrained style of those produced in Greece has added to their uptake in his home market, where they have experienced double-digit growth in Québec and Montreal in the past six years. "The market is finely tuned to Old World styles, including the unabashedly high acid, low-to-moderate alcohol and minimally oaked



PHOTOS: RESTAURANT PHOTOGRAPHY; RAMOND PATRICK; CELEBRITIES; MAX ELIAZOW; SANTORINI; JULIEN CAMMELL; PREVIOUS PAGES: CHURCH; JULIEN CAMMELL; GREY; R. ABRETT; V. CEPHAS; SANTORINI; MICK ROCK; CEPHAS

Grape Varieties

Greece is awash with interesting native grape varieties. Despite having been the source of so many that populate the surrounding countries (note the names of the Italian grape varieties Greco Nero, Greco di Tufo, Grechetto and Grecanico, to name just a few), the most common grapes in Greece are not generally found elsewhere – or at least not as far as we know, although that could change with more DNA research. If familiarizing yourself with the long list of quality grape varieties sounds daunting, be warned that the task is likely to become even more challenging. All over the country, there is a growing interest in reviving heritage varieties.

WHITE Assyrtiko

Planted both on the islands, including Santorini, and on the mainland, Assyrtiko is the grande dame of Greece's white-grape varieties. It is intensely mineral, capable of the most sensitive expression of terroir. Yet its lightly textured palate and irresistibly lemony character can also charm the neophyte wine drinker. The best examples should not be drunk before three years of age and can improve for 10 years or more.

Malagousia

Now the rising star of the Greek wine scene, Malagousia is grown by more than 40 producers around the country, with some turning out impressively oaked versions. It is suggested that the grape is related to Malvasia, on account of its intense perfume, although Malagousia tends to be a little weightier and more textured.

Savatiano

The traditional grape of Retsina, Savatiano is now made into fresh white wines of often startling power. The wines are textured and fragrant, and the best have the capacity to age well.

Moschofilero

This is a grape of easy charm, with effusive fruit aromas that bring to mind both Viognier and Muscat, but with a little more perceptible acidity than both. It is grown in multiple regions around the country but is particularly common on the Peloponnese peninsula.

RED

Agiorgitiko

Greece's most widely-planted red grape, Agiorgitiko, is often used in everyday blends. However, in better sites such as Nemea on the Peloponnese peninsula it can turn out smoky, alluring reds with profound aging potential. The grape is sometimes written as St George on bottles destined for export.

Xinomavro

The name of this grape translates to 'acid black' and, indeed, the wines are insistently crisp. They are inky when young but tend to lose color rather quickly, bringing comparisons to Pinot Noir and Nebbiolo. Macedonia, in northern Greece, is its home and the source of some of Greece's best red wines.



whites that Greece excels in,” says Szabo. “Factor in a wildly intriguing history of wine production, and Greece has it all.”

Likewise, diners in London are now starting to discover the appeal of this growing category. Andrea Briccarello, head sommelier of top restaurants Galvin La Chapelle and Galvin Café à Vin, says when he takes a Greek Assyrtiko and a Chablis to a table, customers always prefer the Assyrtiko. “It’s amazing how popular they have become. They are fantastic wines with great stories behind them so I try to spread the word. People are more open-minded these days and Greece is now *the* place to discover.”

While well on their way to becoming mainstream in some markets of Western Europe and North America, Greek wines are still an exotic commodity in much of Asia, although they are gaining ground. Jean Claude Terdjemane, sommelier of The Peninsula hotel in Shanghai, says the increased interest in Mediterranean cuisine in the past two years has opened a door in China. “Greek wines have a really great opportunity in the Chinese market because there are thousands of years of history behind them and the Chinese people value that.”

There is more to this onset of popularity, though, than ancient history. First, there is the appeal of the actual flavors and aromas of the wines themselves, which have a balance of richness and minerality unlike any other. On top of that, there is the story of their origins. And then there are the irresistible images we so readily associate with Greece. Open a bottle of Santorini, for example, and its rich texture instantly calls to mind visions of abundant sunshine long into the evening; idyllic vacations built around romantic, sun-drenched beaches; and dinners at outdoor tavernas with fresh seafood from the azure waters of the Aegean Sea.

I opened a bottle of 2012 Sigalas at a dinner party recently and one of the guests almost leapt out of his seat on seeing the label. He proceeded to entertain us with stories from his recent yachting adventure in the Cyclades where the boat he was so proud of was peremptorily upstaged when pulling into port by a yacht once owned by the Onassis family. In the space of 20 years, Greek wines have gone from inspiring bitter tales of food poisoning to rarefied accounts of sailing excursions. Not bad; not bad at all. *!*



Diners at Molyvos (above) and Milos (right) are opting for Greek wines in part for their balance of richness and minerality

The Other Great Greek White

In the 1980s, Evangelos Gerovassiliou was a young and ambitious winemaker working for Porto Carras, then one of the few wineries in Greece focused on making top-quality wine. In collaboration with the local university, he explored ancient trellised grapevines that were used by local families for home winemaking. Gerovassiliou vinified dozens of these heritage varieties and for the most part they turned out rather ordinary wine. But one grape, Malagousia, stood out. He planted a small vineyard with the variety and produced a modest quantity of truly impressive wine. In the space of a few decades, Malagousia has shed its rustic origins in the Greek countryside to become a significant player on the world stage and is now harvested by dozens of ambitious wineries around the country. The wines are silky and textured in style but with a brighter structure and an irresistible perfume of hothouse flowers.

Greece: The Terroir

A relatively small country in terms of landmass, Greece has an unusually varied climate and terrain. While in most wine-producing countries, latitude is the determining climatic factor, in Greece the key influences are altitude and sea breezes. The result is a counter-intuitive situation in which

northern Naoussa turns out some of the country’s ripest, most impressive reds, while the southern islands, notably Santorini, are too cool for such wines. Add in a dramatic volcanic history and a winemaking tradition dating back to time immemorial and the result is a terroir as varied as it is storied.

Santorini

The wines of Santorini are perhaps the best-known outside of Greece, and they are currently all the rage with the alternative, hipster crowd. Poor volcanic soil and cutting winds craft wines of a uniquely mineral character. White grape varieties are the star here and bottles labeled simply ‘Santorini’ must be from a minimum of 75 percent Assyrtiko, a grape capable of producing wines of jaw-dropping complexity. Reserved and insistently acidic in its youth, Assyrtiko is sometimes blended with the more approachable Aidani and Athiri. Reds from the Mandilaria and Mavrotragano grapes can be hard and biting, although more approachable examples are on the rise.

Crete

Winemaking on Crete, lying closer to Turkey than Athens, suffered even more than the mainland during the many centuries of Ottoman Turk occupation. Although it has only recently started to focus on quality, this region is now perhaps the most dynamic, with a plethora of new wineries starting to turn out world-class wines.

Naoussa

This was the country’s first appellation and it is still most renowned for red wines. The Xinomavro grape is the star here, and makes some of the country’s finest wines. Tannic and dense when young, the more profound Naoussa can age for decades, taking on a haunting perfume redolent of older Barolo and Barbaresco.

Nemea

Nemea is located in the Peloponnese region, the large peninsula to the west of Athens that fans out like a muscular hand reaching down into the Mediterranean Sea. Agiorgitiko is the only red variety here and is grown at altitudes up to a chilly 900 meters (3,000 feet), with the wines from the highest elevations tending to be quite light or even rosé.

