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The North of Greece

Charting Macedonia's wines from seaside to mountain slopes

By Roger Morris

Forget Athens. Ignore the sand-ringed islands of the Aegean.

Instead, fly into Thessaloniki, Greece's second largest city and ethnic melting pot, the country's historic crossroads between east and west and Greece's gateway to the eternally troubled Balkans.

Thessaloniki is a charming metropolis that has its feet dangling in the ocean and its head in the mountainous clouds. Its mile-long waterfront promenade is always active, always filled with people and vendors. With its ban on skyscrapers, the city has a pleasingly low profile with miles of streets lined with shops below and apartments above. It is home to majestic museums and archaeological ruins.

Beyond that, Thessaloniki is the administrative capital of the Greek region of Macedonia,

which has shared its name for the past 10 years with the now-independent country, Macedonia, which lies on the other side of the mountains. And, for the wine lover, Macedonia is a province of growing importance as a producer of both red and white wines from a variety of *terroirs*.

Recently, I visited three wineries in different sectors of Macedonia.

Domaine Gerovassiliou

Although still a relatively young man, Evangelos Gerovassiliou has already been enshrined as the innovator who has done more than anyone else to transform the Greek wine industry from being a half page in a wine text into a vibrant, thoroughly modern business. As a researcher, he was responsible for sorting through a mass of native grapes that were not commercially grown and deciding which ones had a de-

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Evangelos Gerovassiliou



The Gerovassiliou Estate

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cent chance of making good wine while producing good yields. One of those varieties, Malagousia, is now grown widely throughout the country.

As a winemaker, consultant and winery owner, "Vangelis," as he is known to friends, recognized the importance of international varieties, and he has Chardonnay, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah, Grenache and Merlot growing alongside the native varieties at Domaine Gerovassiliou, just east and south of Thessaloniki. As a Greek wine ambassador, he has traveled broadly to promote this "new old" brand.

"My father had one hectare of vineyards," Gerovassiliou says, "and I collected land very slowly." He bought his first vines in 1986. Today, Domaine Gerovassiliou has 56 hectares (138 acres) of vines around the winery in the

small village of Epanomi, Gerovassiliou's home town. "We are only 120 feet [37 meters] above sea level," he says, "and we have found fossils in the vineyards." Of the plantings, 80 percent are indigenous grapes such as Malagousia and Assyrtiko, both white varieties, and Limnio, Mavrotragano and Mavroudi reds. Whites make up three-quarters of production.

Gerovassiliou was a student in 1973 when his professor collected 27 different varieties of vines from around the country that were not commercially planted. "Malagousia came from one pergola that was planted in this mountain village where the professor was raised," he says. Gerovassiliou grew and tested all the varieties, and settled on Malagousia and Assyrtiko. The vines were grafted, and the first commercial vineyard was planted in 1978. More may be

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coming.

And the Domaine Gerovassiliou wines are all very well-made – mainly blends, including an excellent Syrah with a touch of Viognier.

Biblia Chora

Gerovassiliou also had a hand in founding Biblia Chora with his good friend and research colleague Vassilis Tsaktsarlis. The two men chose a site northeast of Thessaloniki, near Kavalla on the road to Istanbul, to build this beautiful hillside winery with its organic vineyards. Although the vineyards are on the slopes of Mt. Pangeon, the Strymonic Gulf is nearby to provide marine influences. All told, there are about 45 hectares (112 acres) of estate vines at an average 1,050 feet elevation, with most work

being done by hand. Another 10 hectares (25 acres) of purchased grapes help produce almost a half-million bottles of wine.

“In Greece, we like fresh wines, so we begin bottling in early October,” Tsaktsarlis says. They start with the Estate White, a blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Assyrtiko, a common regional pairing in the blending tanks. Another blend, Olivios White, mixes equal amounts of Assyrtiko and Semillon, using barrel fermentation and lees stirring. “Assyrtiko is a good blending grape because of its acidity,” he says. However, the Areti White is 100% Assyrtiko – a spicy, gamey, assertive wine.

The reds, whether the 100% Agiorgitiko in the Areti Red or the international varieties and

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Vineyard at Biblia Chora

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blends, chiefly Merlot and Cabernet, tend to have brighter fruit. A rosé, made of 100% Syrah, is also quite nice.

Katsaros Estate

I have seldom, if ever, used the word “magical” to describe a winery, but that is what came to mind when we arrived at Katsaros after a half-hour climb up a twisting, perilous, breath-taking road from the Gulf of Salonika, past the mountain village of Krania to the upper slopes of sprawling Mount Olympus, several miles southeast of Thessaloniki on the road to Athens.

There the Katsaros family has created an excellent modern winery perched on rocky slopes at an elevation of 750 meters (2,460 feet) above the sea – which is visible in the hazy distance from the Katsaros winery and home. In 1986, Dr. Dimitris Katsaros, a practicing physician who had been growing grapes on the mountain as a hobby, started a winery there. Gradually, he patched together about 9 hectares (23 acres) of vineyards in 21 small parcels scattered all over the mountain, consisting of Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Three wines are made – Chardonnay, Merlot and a Cabernet-based Estate Red – all premium priced.



Evripidis Katsaros on Mount Olympus

Now retired, Katsaros lives there with his wife Stella, an accomplished chef and cookbook author. His son, Evripidis, was educated as a biochemist, trained in Bordeaux and Burgundy, and now makes the wines, all from international varieties. However, some experimentation is being done with native varieties. The organically grown grapes by necessity are tended and harvested by hand. The Chardonnay is fermented in small barrels and is creamy with lots of minerality. The Cabernet is especially impressive – big and complex with violets, chocolates and pencil lead. The Merlot is the opposite, very smooth and elegant, but not especially complex.

It is not surprising, given the wildness of the terrain, that Katsaros is the only winery within the appellation, sold under the label of Vin de Pays Krania Olympus.

Nectar of the Gods? Zeus juice? Let’s not get carried away – but the wines of Macedonia are certainly ones that we mere mortals can afford and enjoy. 🍷

Roger Morris is Managing Editor of Sommelier News and also regularly contributes to Robb Report, Saveur, Wine Enthusiast, Beverage Media and epicurious.com. He is also author of The Brandywine Book of Food, a book about regional culinary terroir.



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Prosecco Bubbles Italy to Top

The Italian Wine and Food Institute (IWFI) in New York says Italy is the leading importer of wines in the US. According to a press release by the IWFI, imports of Italian wine continued to outpace historic rival Australia in the first five months of 2010, thanks in large measure to the booming popularity of Italian sparkling wines such as Prosecco.

Down but Not Dry

The overall economy may be down, but American consumers are buying more wine than ever. According to the Beverage Information Group's *2010 Wine Handbook*, the wine industry continued to post positive results in 2009, marking its 16th consecutive year of gains. Overall wine consumption rose 0.8 percent. "As the country recovers from the recessionary environment, the wine industry continues to look positive," says Eric Schmidt, Manager of Information Services for the Beverage Information Group based in Norwalk, Conn. "We expect to see wine consumption increase to 310.7 million cases by 2014." The expansion is predicted to continue for the next five years. 

The First Press features monthly wine related news selected by roving correspondent and long-time professional journalist, David Wilkening.

US ADDRESS	CANADIAN ADDRESS	TELEPHONE
363 Lang Blvd., Grand Island, NY 14072	269-762 Upper James Hamilton, ON L9C 3A2	U.S. Toll Free (866) 412-0464 Canada Toll Free (866) 399-5009
Fax (954) 344-9551	Fax (905) 858-3440	U.S. (302) 622-3811 Other Countries (905) 858-1217

E-mail: info@internationalsommelier.com
Web: www.internationalsommelier.com

It's a Matter of Taste