

BY EVANGELOS "EVAN" SAVIOLIDIS



GROWING UP IN A GREEK HOUSEHOLD, THE USUAL WINE OF CHOICE WAS RETSINA OR SOME TABLE WINE FROM ZEUS KNOWS WHERE.

I endured those harrowing experiences until I became serious about wine in the mid 1990s. I remember my epiphany! I was participating in a blind 1990 Bordeaux Tasting (a fabulous vintage) and our panel was informed that there was a mystery wine in the line up. In the end, the ringer ranked second, beating out classified growths. That wine was the Château Porto Carras 1990, a Bordeaux-style blend with a dash of indigenous Limnio.

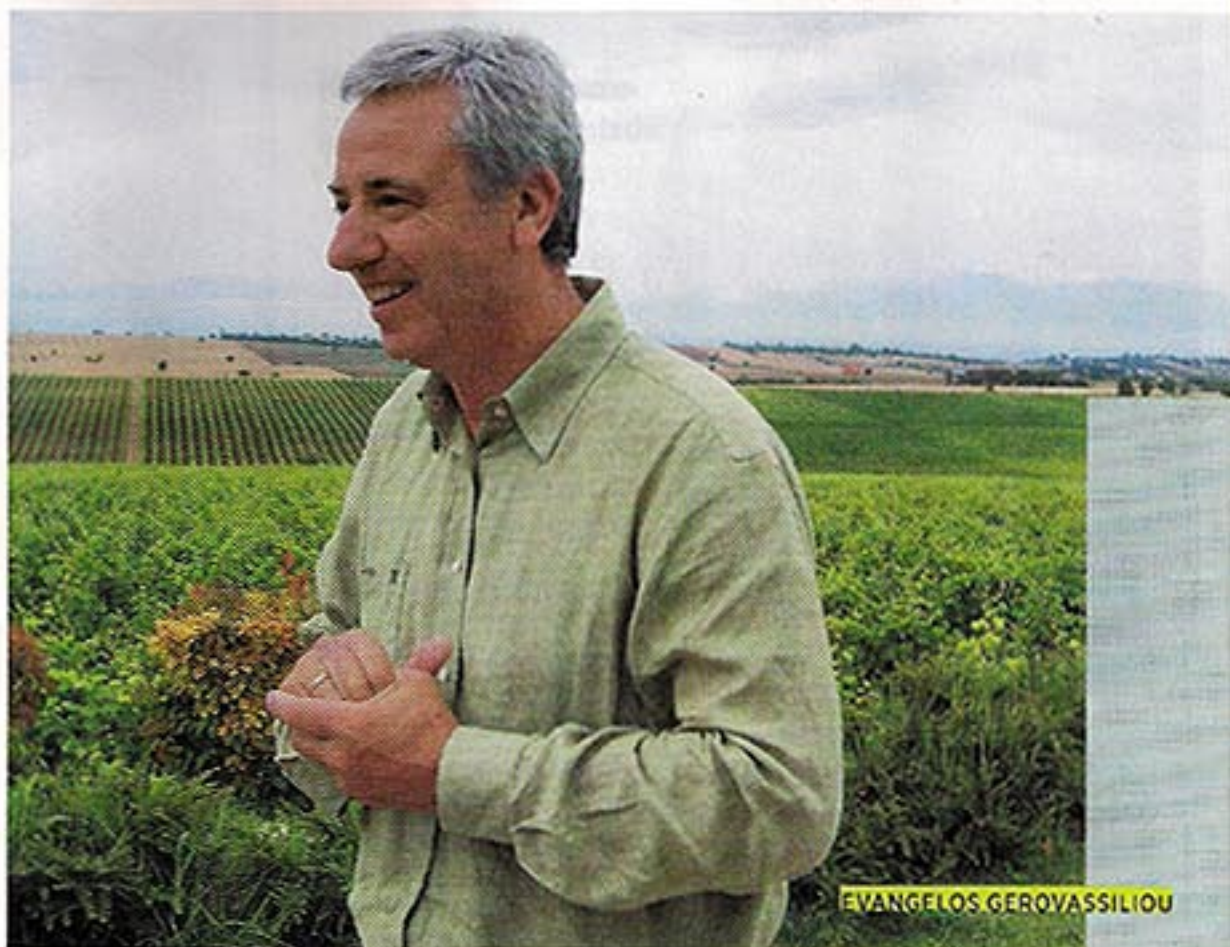
Since that time, I have tried to experience as much nouveau Greek wine as possible, both from indigenous and French grapes. Still, there are many that I have as yet to experience, especially with over 300 local varietals. So when the opportunity to return to the homeland with a group of sommeliers and journalists arose, I jumped at the chance. Here is a snapshot of some of the top producers and regions I visited while in the land of Dionysus.

NORTHERN GREECE

DOMAINE GEROVASSILIOU

One of the fathers of the modern Greek wine movement, Evangelos Gerovassiliou trained under famed Bordeaux University Professor Emile Peynaud. When he returned home in 1976, he was hired as the oenologist for Château Porto Carras, where he made some of Greece's earliest brilliant wines.

In 1983, he decided to resuscitate and replant the family vineyard with both French (20 per cent) and indigenous (80 per cent) grapes. One of the grapes he is credited with reviving is the ancient white varietal, Malagousia. When treated with respect, it is Greece's answer to Gewürztraminer. Other grapes grown at the domaine include Viognier, Syrah, Mavroudi, Mavrotragano and Limnio. The last varietal has been documented since the time of Aristotle, circa 350 B.C.



We tasted an impressive array of older and younger wines. The Syrah 2001, which still has another decade of life ahead of it, earned a solid 93 points for its concentrated violets, raisins, dark fruits and visinada (sour cherry syrup). The Evangelo 2006, a Côte-Rôtie styled blend of Syrah and Viognier, earned 89 points, as did the 100 per cent Viognier.

As for whites, the Chardonnay 2008 was a full-bodied yet elegant offering with loads of peach, vanilla and tropical fruit. The Fumé Sauvignon Blanc 2009 showed a creamy texture and flavours of pear, apple, citrus, flowers and spice. Dessert wise, the Late Harvest Malagousia 2009 scored 89 for its flavours of peach, banana, orange blossom and spice.

BOUTARI

Boutari is a goliath of the Greek wine industry. The company, located in the region of Naoussa, was the first to bottle Greek wine back in 1879, as well as the first to ship abroad. Today, it produces a plethora of wines, in seven different regions, covering all points on the Greek compass.

While tasting through the portfolio, Bordeaux-trained Dr Yannis Voyatis gave us the lowdown on Xinomavro (acid-black), the local Naoussa varietal. It is a challenging grape. It requires heat, it is hard to extract colour, it is historically astringent and responds well to French oak. He even compared it to Nebbiolo.

My favourite table wines of the tasting were the 2004 Grande Reserve Naoussa, 1993 Grande Reserve Naoussa, 2009 Moschofilero, and Skalani — a Cretan blend of Kotsifali and Syrah. As a finale, we were served a trio of dried grape dessert wines — two from Crete, Iouliatiko and Spinis (88 each), and a Vin Santo from Santorini (89). The philosophy behind these products, according to Voyatis, "is to produce a range of wines based on antiquity, from Greek grapes dried under the Greek sun."

KTIMA KIR-YIANNI

In the village of Yanakohori is Ktima Kir-Yianni (Sir John's Estate). Yiannis Boutari is considered the patriarch of the modern Greek wine industry. During his tenure at the namesake family win-

ery in the 1960s, he updated everything — stainless steel, temperature controlled fermentation, new oak barrels and shorter aging times, to name a few niceties. More importantly, he encouraged his winemakers to spread their wings and learn from abroad. Abroad, in most cases, meant France and Bordeaux. Many of Greece's current role call of great winemakers apprenticed at Boutari.

In 1996, he left the family business, taking with him the finest 48 hectares in Naoussa. After many years of experimentation with rootstock, soil and trellising, the winery now concentrates on five clones of Xinomavro, as well as the softening agents known as Merlot and Syrah.

These wines are not for the faint of heart. They are powerful offerings with boatloads of tannins, which will probably never wane. They all require age and are clearly meant for food. From the 2007 vintage, The Kir-Yianni Estate earns 87 points, the Dyo Elies (Two Olives) gets 89, Daporos and Rannista 90 each.

ALPHA ESTATE

West of Naoussa, tucked behind Mount Vermion, is Amyndeo. The climate here is purely continental; this is Greece's coolest region. The soil, which is sand-based, with low fertility and good drainage, makes for small concentrated berries. These are but a few factors that attracted Angelo Iatridis to the region's terroir. After returning home from training in Bordeaux, Alsace, the Rhone and Madiran, he started his own consultation company before planting in the late 1990s. A few years later, Alpha Estate was born.

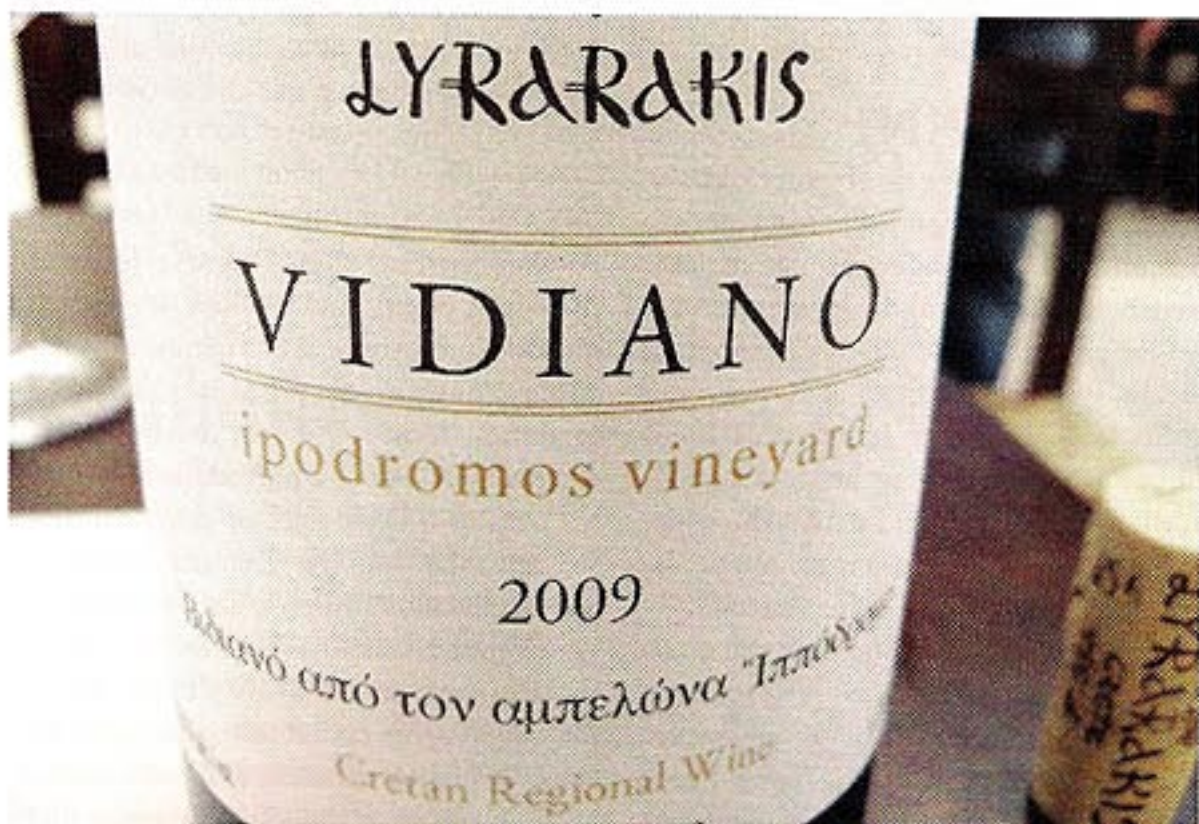
While touring the impeccably manicured vineyards, he told us he grows 12 varieties. These include the rarities of Barbera, Gewürztraminer, Montepulciano and Tannat, a grape he developed a predilection for while working at Château Montus in Madiran. When our discussion turned to the potential of Xinomavro in

the region, he saw a few of us wince in anticipation of the upcoming tannic pain that befell us in Naoussa. He reassured us that we wouldn't have to worry in Amyndeo, as the long hang time and sandy soil impart extra heat to the vineyards, helping to tame the wild-child nature of the "acid-black" grape. He was right.

Stylistically, the wines are very modern-style Bordelaise — elegant, concentrated and refined. The Xinomavro Reserve Old Vines 2006 and 2007 earn 89 and 90 points respectively. Both show dark cherries, violets, plums and spice, with the 2007 having a touch more depth

CRETE

We only had one day on the island, so after checking into our hotel, we participated in a tasting of 30 producers of Cretan wine. We learn some interesting facts. The island produces 20 per cent of Greece's wine. There are four OPAP (*Onomasia Proeléfseos Anotéras Piótitos*, the Greek equivalent of AOC) regions — Peze, Dafnes, Arhanes and Sitia, as well as a whole slew of grapes I have never heard of or tasted before. One of these is the red varietal Mandilaria, which bottled on its own is possibly the harshest grape I have ever come across.



on the taste buds. Angelo informs us that 2007 was a fabulous vintage. The 2006 and 2007 Alpha Estate, both blends of 60 per cent Syrah, 20 per cent Xinomavro and 20 per cent Merlot also earned 89 and 90 points respectively. That being said, my favourite red wines were the ones based on Tannat — the 2006 Alpha One and 2007 Utopia both garnered 91 points. As for whites, the 100 per cent Sauvignon Blanc Alpha Estate 2009 was full-bodied and intense.

DOULOUFAKIS

The 80-year-old winery of Douloufakis is in the appellation of Dafnes. Nikolas Douloufakis, the current torch-bearer, did his schooling in Alba before taking over the reins at the family homestead. His Aspros Lagos White, a 100 per cent Vidiano aged in a combination of acacia wood and French oak blew me away with its concentration, complexity and length. Equally impressive is its *confrère*, the Aspros Lagos Red. The Cab Sauv wine is



GAIA'S LEON KARATSALOS AND YIANNIS PARASKEVOPOULOS

opaque wine with aromas of cedar, cassis, plums and spice. My other selection was the 2009 Liatico, for its smoke, raisins, plum and cedar personality.

SANTORINI

There is no denying the beauty of Santorini. The combination of volcanic rock and Mediterranean climate make it hard believe that anything agricultural thrives on the Spartan, almost moonlike terrain. But it does.

So how does this happen? It is all about sea water. Strong breezes prevail on the island. The wind drives the overnight fog into the porous rock vineyards, giving the gift of life. The seawater is also said to give the saline/mineral quality to the Assyrtiko wines. These same winds have resulted in the unique basket crowns used to grow the grapes. Since the terrain is dusty and full of sand and small rocks, the grape clusters must be protected within the crown. If exposed, the shoots and grapes would become tattered, as well as sun burnt.

GAIA

Gaia (Mother Earth) is owned by Leon Karatsalos and Yiannis Paraskevoopoulos. They first started to produce wine from island fruit back in 1994. Today, they also own a small winery in Nemea. The Thalassitis Santorini 2009, made from 100 per cent Assyrtiko, earned 87 points,

the 2008 oaked version scored 89, and the 2009 Assyrtiko Wild Ferment a balmy 88. From Nemea, the Gaia S from 2008 and 2007, both blends of Agirotitiko and Syrah, earned 88 points, and the 2009 14-18h Rose, 87 points.

SANTO WINES

Perched on one of the highest peaks is the island co-op, Santo Wines. By law, all growers/producers are members. Agricultural pursuits are not solely restricted to grapes. Tomatoes, caper leaves, capers and split peas are also part of the mandate.

During a brief tour of the facilities, we are told that the greatest threat to Santorini's agriculture is its own beauty. When tourists started to arrive, many farmers gave up on grapes et al, transforming and/or abandoning the land for the easy money of hotels and restaurants. To help preserve the singular grape and vineyard heritage, a petition has been presented to UNESCO.

We arrived on the mezzanine overlooking the azure sea, where five member wineries awaited. The dry wines were good, but my attention was drawn to the dessert specialty, Vin Santo.

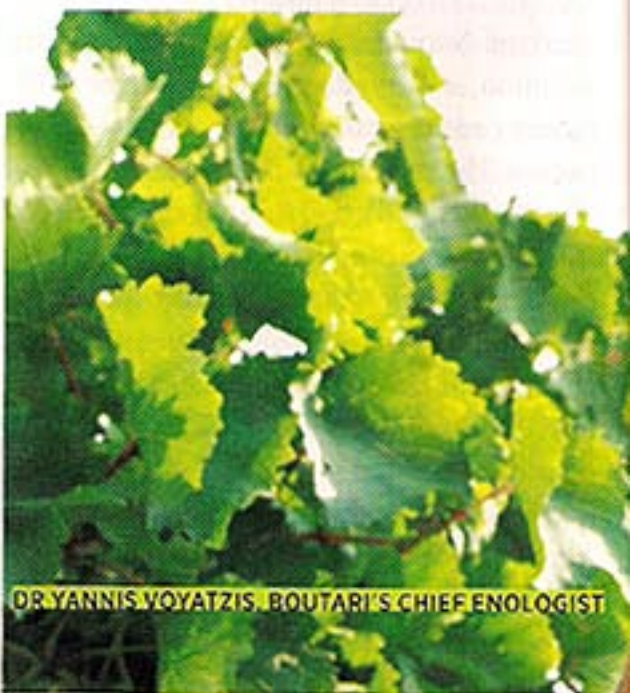
After harvesting, the grapes are laid on the terraces from where they were picked and left to dry in the sun for 10 to 14 days. After fermentation, extensive barrel aging occurs. There is also Mezzo, a less sweet/dried version of the famed dessert wine.

My favourite stickies were the 1999 Canava Roussos, 2004 Santorini...i, the 2006 Koutsogiannopoulos, 2003 Kavala and the four-year-old Santo Wines.

My dry wine of choice was the 2008 Santo Wine Santorini Grand Reserve 2007, a barrel aged 100 per cent Assyrtiko made from 80- to 100-year old vines. It earned a solid 90 points.

ARGYROS WINERY

The sweet fest continued at Argyros. We tasted through a whole array of Vin San-

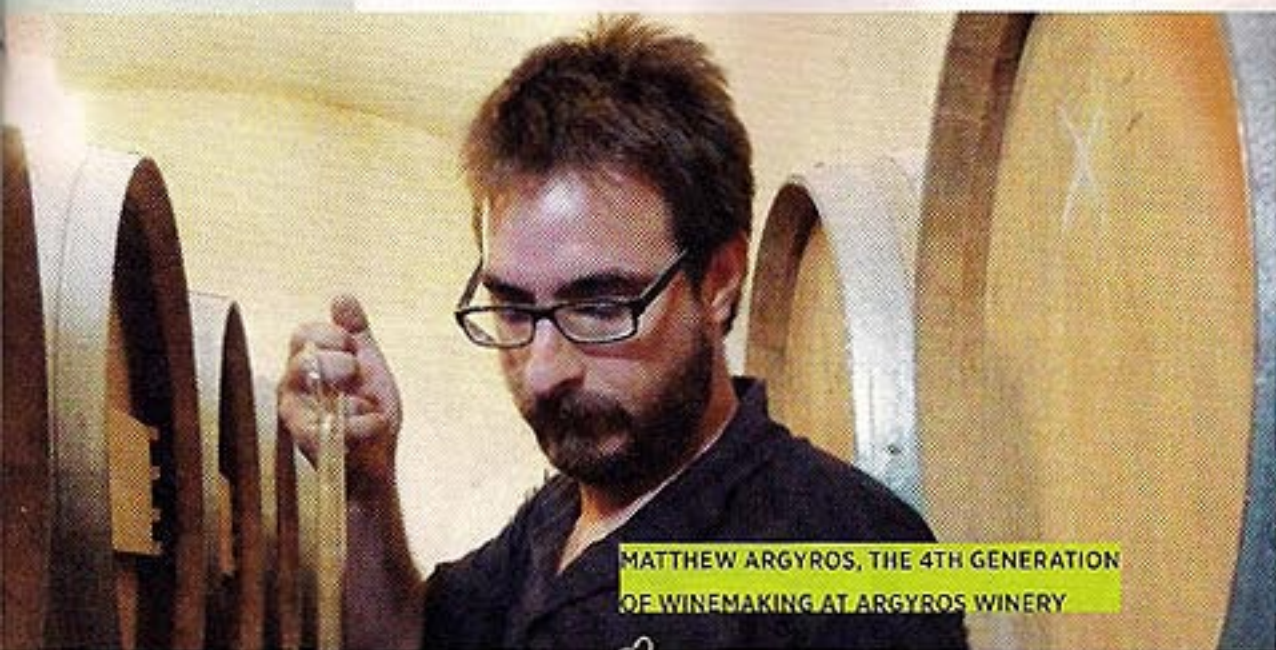


DR. YIANNIS VOYATZIS, BOUTARI'S CHIEF ENOLOGIST

tos both in bottle and barrel, looking back over 30-plus years. These beauties from the father and son team of Yiannis and Matthew Argyros offer mind-blowing

concentration, complexity and longevity. No wine scored under 90 points. The dry whites weren't too shabby either. The 2009 Assyrtiko Argyros garnered 88 points and the 2009 Estate Argyros, 90.

offering up intense honey, spice, flowers, tropical fruit, minerals and citrus. This full-bodied offering had another 10 years ahead of it. We also had the chance to try the 2003 and 2009 oaked versions. Both



MATTHEW ARGYROS, THE 4TH GENERATION OF WINEMAKING AT ARGYROS WINERY

DOMAINE SIGALAS

The maestro, Paris Sigalas, originally trained as a mathematician at the Sorbonne, before turning his sights to the vine. A brilliant self-taught winemaker, he started his operation in 1991.

I have always held the belief that Sigalas' white wines only show their pedigree after a few years in bottle, as they can be somewhat unyielding in their youth. We had a chance to do a mini vertical of

showed an extra dimension thanks to the oak. The best reds of our island visit were his 2007 and 2008 Mavrotragano, a red grape that Paris resuscitated from oblivion. Both offered oodles of fruit and structure, but the 2008 had a little more depth. His 2004 Vinsanto wasn't too shabby either, scoring 91 points.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Trying to pigeonhole Greek wine styles into the typical New World or Old categories is nearly impossible. Yes, modern techniques are used, but with a myriad of indigenous grapes, a singular product is available to the consumer.

If there is one grape that is destined to become Greece's calling card in the decade ahead, it is Santorini's Assyrtiko. In terms of a personal discovery, it was Malagousia, for its Alsatian qualities. When looking at the French cépages, Syrah is in a league of its own. In the end, the best reds might even be the ones that are Greco-Franco blends.

Ultimately, whatever your personal preference, these wines are at their best with food and friends. After all, that is what Greek culture is all about.

... To read the complete diary of Evan's Big Greek Odyssey, please visit the Tidings website at tidingsmag.com. □



his Santorini, going back to 2003, which proved this. We sampled the 2009 (91), 2008 (90), 2007 (89), 2006 (90) and 2003 (92). The last was firing on all cylinders,

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