

# Divine Wine

## Greek wines are worthy of your attention

BY W. PETER HOYNE

My early exposure to the wines of Greece was during college. Occasionally, a friend would bring a bottle of Retsina, Ouzo or something red from the Greek Islands to share.

I only consumed a small amount, thinking they were not my favorites, or was it that the quality was missing. Years later I returned with a better appreciation, realizing a revival was taking place in the quality and direction of the wines from Greece.

For 4,000 years or more, perhaps dating back to 7000 BC, wine has been a way of life and part of the Greek lifestyle.

In the late 20th century, with the introduction of modern winemaking techniques, a new wave of artisanal producers surfaced, committed to re-creating the indigenous varietal wines of Greece. In some cases, producers are using international grapes to express the uniqueness of the terroir in their country. These wines have evolved to accommodate the Mediterranean food and the culture of Greece. As locals describe it, "wine is food."

With some 350 indigenous grape varieties in Greece, it could be a harrowing task to remember or even try to pronounce many of them, so I have narrowed down some contemporary and noteworthy examples. Personally, I have been fascinated with the individuality and modern charm of the dry and elegant white grapes of Assyrtico, Savatiano and Malagouzia.

A short distance from Athens, along the southern peninsula of the Aegean Sea, are Attica and Papagiannakos Winery. Founded in 1919, Vassilis Papagiannakos is a third-generation owner and winemaker, focused on bringing the indigenous white wines of Greece into the forefront of the 21st century.

In a region that has been inhabited for 3,000 years, the vineyards are planted primarily to Savatiano and Malagouzia. The sea breezes from the Aegean, coupled with low humidity and a rocky, limestone subsoil, contribute to the elegant complexion of these whites.

2013 Domaine Papagiannakos "Vareli" Savatiano: This wine is first vinified in stainless steel before finishing fermentation in French Oak barrels. Pale yellow with lanolin and pear oil aromatic, it is endowed with a supple core of stone peach and melon that are melded together with delicate acidity. It is age-worthy.

2016 Domaine Papagiannakos Kalogeri Malagouzia: Light yellow with fragrant



jasmine flowers, the ripe apple skins are immediately attractive and nicely balanced with a touch of fresh acidity.

The family run estate and winery of Domaine de Costa Lazaridi is situated in the rolling Tuscan-like landscape north of Athens. The estate is a composite of many vineyards in a unique microclimate, which are all organic and dry farmed.

This winery has brought prominence to international varieties with energetic interpretations of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot. The 2014 Domaine Costa Lazaridi Syrah is a full-throttle wine with juicy cassis overtones. The 2014 Chateau Julia Merlot, named after Julia Lazaridi, is dark ruby with tea, red plums and raspberries that are backed by youthful tannins.

Positioned high on the cliffs overlooking the Port of Athinios and the azure waters of the Aegean Sea is Venetsanos Winery in Santorini. The Venetsanos family was ahead of its time in building a unique gravity-flow winery facility in 1947. The strong winds and black volcanic ash soils of this island are lean in nutrients and perfect for breeding the native Assyrtico grape.

These ungrafted old vines unravel on the ground, growing in a basket-like configuration rather than on a trellis. Oenologist and winemaker Ioanna Vamvakouri has fully utilized her talents in refining the mineral rich character of the low-yielding Assyrtico grape, capturing the attention of serious enthusiasts.

2015 Venetsanos Assyrtico: I tasted this wine from the 2016, 2015 and 2014 vintages with consistent notes. A green-tinged color leads to some mineral notes and salinity. This wine reveals lots of energy between layers of green apple and white citrus flavors. Over time the wine will reward you with viscous yellow fruits layered with a honeyed richness.

Acceptance of Greek wines should rest not only on the public's perception, but more importantly upon authenticity, food compatibility and their high quality-to-value ratio.