

W. Greek Wines

Vinyards breathe life into lost classics

Vineyards are springing up all over Greece, in some cases restoring wine production at places long abandoned. This vineyard on Lesbos, an island famed for its wine during antiquity, belongs to the Lambrou family, and yields their dry red Methymneos wine.

Have you raised a glass to Greek wine tradition recently? And just how far back in that 3000-year-old tradition are we talking about? For Greek wine producers today, all eras are up for exploration.

When Greece's wine renaissance began in earnest, around 1975, it was concentrated at places where wine traditions were alive, if not exactly well. This included places such as Nemea in the Peloponnesus, whose wines are now found in every bona fide Greek restaurant. But there were many other locales where grape-growing was in a state of neglect. Some once-renowned places had practically disappeared from the wine map. Likewise, some reputable native Greek grape varieties were nearly extinct.

But as enthusiasm for wine grew, Greek producers started thinking about reviving fallen traditions. Sometimes the revival occurred because of a place, sometimes it was because of a grape variety and sometimes it was because of the type of wine. The producers who have undertaken these efforts—arguably the most exciting aspect of Greek wine today—are counting on finding receptive consumers for this new market. The many tourists who come to Greece potentially constitute a prime market, but lasting success ultimately depends on well-informed wine enthusiasts, including Greek-Americans.

Here are some developments worth keeping tabs on.

Ikaria

Known in Homer's day for its Pramnian wine, the island of Ikaria was losing its wine status even during Classical times, and by the 20th century, its small output of grapes was mostly destined for raisins. But in the past decade three family wineries have come onto the market: Afianes, Karamalis and Tsantiris. Dry red wines are produced mostly from folkiano grapes and dry whites mostly

from begleri, all grown in the area around Raches. It would be impossible to say what resemblance any of the resulting wines might bear to ancient Pramnian, but the grapes used are typical of the eastern Aegean area.

Lesvos (Mytilene)

In the early era when the poetess Sappho was conducting her salon, Lesbos was among the most famous Aegean names in wine. But nearly all of its vineyards were abandoned early in the 20th century, and the island's only association with beverages thereafter was ouzo. Anxious to put Mytilene's name back on the roster of Greek wines, the Lambrou family planted a vineyard at Chidira after rescuing and propagating the few remaining vines of the local grape known simply as krasostafylo ('wine-grape'), which is the source of their dry red Methymneos wine (see the label).



Santorini

This popular island of the Cyclades has rebuilt its reputation in recent years with dry white wines and the ultra-sweet visanto (also usually white). But red wine was always a part of island tradition, and may well have been more typical of the island during antiquity. In recent centuries, red wines were based mostly on the mandilaria grape, usually with some partially dried grapes included. The Sigalas winery, already a noted producer of whites, is attempting to raise the profile of the scarce mavrotragano variety, which some consider the red grape best suited for quality red wine on Santorini. The Sigalas wine from that variety uses a proportion of overripe grapes.

by Miles Lambert-Gócs