

Greece Rising Up!
What was once the past is now the Future

By Evangelos 'Evan' Saviolidis

Having grown up in a Greek household, the usual wine of choice at the dinner table was Retsina or some table wine from Zeus knows where. Needless to say, those harrowing experiences endured until I became serious about wine in the mid 90s. I remember the moment of my epiphany! I was participating in a blind 1990 Bordeaux Tasting (a fabulous vintage). Our panel was informed that there was a ringer in the flight. We were taken to task to rank our top three selections and to try to deduce the mystery wine. When all was said and done, the ringer ranked second, beating out classified growths. That wine was the Chateau Porto Carras 1990, a Bordeaux styled blend with a dash of indigenous Limnio added for good measure.

Since that time, I have tried to experience as much nouveau Greek wine as possible, both from indigenous and French grapes. The only thing, historically, standing in the way, has been the provincial liquor board's non willingness to place Greek products on the shelf in favour of their own agenda. Thankfully, a new generation of wine importers, both in Quebec and Ontario, have done a fabulous job bringing modern wines of that ancient land to the consumer.

Still, there are many that I have as yet to experience, especially with over 300 indigenous varieties. So when the opportunity to return to the homeland with a group of sommeliers and journalists arose, I jumped at the chance. Here is my week long diary in the land of Dionysus.

Day 1

After an overnight flight and a connection through Germany, our group landed in Thessaloniki where we checked into the Electra Palace. Each room had a breathtaking view onto the sea, with Mount Olympus as the backdrop. After refreshing ourselves, we were slowly eased into the local wine and food culture with dinner at the hotel. The wines of Biblia Chora, a partnership between winemaking superstars and long time friends Evangelos Gerovassiliou and Vassilis Tsaktsarlis were served.

The Biblia Chora Rose 08, made from 100% Syrah, scored 87 points. The red berry fruits, acid and slight tannic edge paired beautifully with the saltiness of the grilled haloumi cheese. The 89 point Ovilos White 09, an oak aged blend of Semillion and Assyrtiko, was a great partner to the roasted eggplant and feta, as the smokiness of the wine matched the smokiness of the aubergine. For the main course, we were served bifteki (grilled meat patties) and veal cheeks in a cinnamon scented tomato sauce. The red Biblia did the job (88).

Before turning in for the night, the mandatory phyllo pastry desserts with the equally mandatory Tsipouro (Greek grappa) was served. Sleep came easily.

Day 2

Departing at 9 am, we travelled 25km southwest of Thessaloniki to the town of Epanomi and Domaine Gerovassiliou. Evangelos Gerovassiliou is a legend. One of the father's of the modern wine movement, he trained under fabled Bordeaux University Professor, Emile Peynaud. Upon returning home in 1976, he was hired as the oenologist for Chateau 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%) and indigenous grapes (80%). One of the grapes which he is credited with bringing back 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 latter 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 it, earned a solid 93 points for its concentrated violets, raisins, dark fruits and visinada (sour cherry syrup). The Evangelo 2006, a Cote Rotie styled blend of Syrah and Viognier earned 89 points, as did the 100% Viognier.

For lunch at the winery, we were served grilled kalamari topped with eggplant and grilled peppers as an appetizer. Mayfish, a firm textured fish, with horta (bitter greens) was the main course. These paired perfectly with two wines. The first was the Chardonnay 2008 (90), a full bodied yet elegant oak aged wine with loads of peach, vanilla and tropical fruit. The other was the Fume Sauvignon Blanc 2009 (88), which showed a creamy texture and flavours of pear, apple, citrus, flowers, and spice. For dessert, the Late Harvest Malagousia 2009 (89) with all its peach, banana, orange blossom and spice was a perfect match for the clove scented green figs in simple syrup.

After lunch, our voyage took us south east to Halkidiaki and the singular Côtes de Meliton appellation. The region is defined by two details. First, it is the only OPAP (AOC) region which authorizes French grapes. Elsewhere, the more liberal Regional Wine/Vin de Pays designation comes into play. Secondly, it is a one winery only appellation – Domaine Porto Carras.

The most famous historic estate in all of Greece, it was founded by celebrated ship owner, John Carras. With no history of viticulture, Carras brought in Emile Peynaud, who helped to supervise the planting of twenty seven varieties. Gerovassiliou was then brought in the 70s, and the rest, as they say, is history, albeit short in Greek terms. Unfortunately, in the early 2000s, the company fell into bankruptcy, and is now in the hands of an investment group.

I had high hopes for the wines, but the decline has set in. On a positive note, the winery has just hired a new Chilean winemaker, so there is hope on the horizon.

Dinner that night was back in Thessaloniki which included the mandatory Tsipouro.

Day 3

It was an early morning departure to the Naoussa region and Boutari, a goliath of the industry. The company was the first to bottle Greek wine back in 1879, as well as the first to ship abroad. Today, they produce a plethora of wines, in seven different regions, covering all points on the Greek compass. Bordeaux trained Dr. Yannis Voyatis, who has served as lead enologist for the past 25 years, led our tasting.

While tasting through the portfolio, Voyatis gave us the low down 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 favorite table wines of the tasting were the 2004 Grande Reserve Naoussa (87), 93 Grande Reserve Naoussa (89), 2009 Moschofilero (88), and Skalani (89)- 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."

Lunch at Boutari was time honoured. It consisted of spanakopita/tiro-pita, soutzoukakia (Greek meatballs), beef in gravy, and of course, salad.

The afternoon stop was next door in the village of Yanakohori and Ktima Kir-Yanni (Sir John's Estate). Yannis Boutari is considered the patriarch of the modern Greek wine industry. During his tenure at the namesake family winery in the 60s, he updated everything to the techno novel niceties-stainless steel, temperature controlled fermentation, new oak barrels and shorter aging times, to name a few. 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. By law, a Naoussa wine must be made from 100% Xinomavro. The winery produces this, as well as an array of Vin de Pays blended wines with the foreign invaders.

The 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 07 vintage, The Kir-Yianni Estate earns 87 points, the Dyo Elies (Two Olives) 89, Daporos 90, and Ramnista 90.

West of Naoussa, tucked behind Mount Vermion, is the up and coming region of Amyndeio. The climate here is purely continental and is the coolest growing region in Greece (snow is common place in winter.)

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 Angelos Iatridis to the region. After returning home from training in Bordeaux, Alsace, the Rhone and Madiran, he started his own consultation company before planting his property in the late 1990s. A few years later, Alpha Estate was born.

Angelo is extremely meticulous. He is also an ardent believer in the local terroir. While touring the impeccably manicured vineyards he tells us he grows twelve varietals. These include the rarities of Barbera, Gewurztraminer, Montepulciano and Tannat, a grape he developed a predilection for while working at Chateau 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 re-assured us that it was not the case in Amyndeio, 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. It was the most impressive portfolio tasting of the entire trip.

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 07 having a touch more depth on the taste buds. Angelo informs us that 2007 was a fabulous vintage. The 06 and 07 Alpha Estate, both blends of 60% Syrah, 20% Xinomavro and 20% Merlot also earned 89 and 90 points respectively. That being said, my favorite red wines were the ones based on Tannat- the 06 Alpha One and 07 Utopia both garnered 91 points. As whites go, the 100% Sauvignon Blanc Alpha Estate was full bodied and intense (90).

Dinner was hosted by Alpha at Thomas Restaurant in Sklithro, which offers contemporary Greek. The Sauvignon Blanc was an absolute killer with the local grilled/smoked red peppers and salad with plevrotus mushrooms and parmeggiano. The main offering, which consisted of a combination of roasted lamb shanks, sautéed pork chunks in a tomato based sauce, and braised veal cheeks with tagliatelle, was phenomenal with the reds. Even though we were stuffed, before leaving, we were served one of the most unique dessert items ever- candied tomatoes. Of course, Tsipouro followed, but I abstained.

Day 4

After a long night, an easy day tasting with a group of wine producers from the Drama appellation was much appreciated.

Brothers Nico and Costa Lazaridi have established competing wineries in this region. Chateau Nico Lazaridi's Magic Mountain 2009, a six month barrel aged Sauvignon Blanc earned 88 points. Domaine Costa Lazaridi's Amethystos White, a Sauvignon Blanc/Assyrtiko/Semillion blend garnered the same. The Amethystos Red, a blend of 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Merlot and 5% Limnio, earned 87 points.

Another winery which impressed me was Pavlidis. The 2009 Thema White (89), 2007 Thema Red (88), 2009 Assyrtiko (88) and the super duper 2007 Syrah (91) were all delicious. Other wines of note were the 2008 Oenogenesis Skylights Rose (87) and the 2008 Wine Art Idisma Drios Chardonnay (86).

That evening, our local guide, Kleo, took us to one of his favorite restaurants, Taverna Anestis. An assault of food, family style, is sent our way. Greeks like to eat. Tzatziki, taramousalata (caviar dip), eggplant dip, Russian salad, horta, horiatiki (village salad), dolmades, paidakia (grilled lamb), a local version of haggis (our Scottish Sommelier and travel mate Jamie Drummond went crazy for this), souvlaki, kefte (Greek mini hamburgers), french fries with cheese, and Greek mille feuille/baklava for dessert. Our wine, a vertical of older Naoussas going back to the 90s stood the test of time, pairing well with the hearty feast. Oh, and yes, Tsipouro was served once again. And once again, I refrained as I knew that there was early flight to Crete the next morning.

Day 5

A dawn wakeup call was the clue that our entourage had to catch our Olympic Airlines flight to Heraklion, the capital of Crete. We only had one day on the island, so after checking into the stunning Galaxy Hotel, we head downstairs for a tasting of thirty producers of Cretan wine. We learn some quick facts before starting. The island produces 20% of the entire Greek production. There are 4 OPAP 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.

My favorites reds of the tasting were the Mediterra Winery Mirambelo 2007 (70% Kotsifali/ 30% Mandalaria-88 points), the Tamiloaki Ekti Ekdos 2006 (Kotsifali, C.S. and Merlot- 87), Diamantakis Diamantopetra 2008 (Syrah/Mandalaria -88), and the 'dead ringer for an aged Barolo' tandem of the 1998 and 2000 Oikonomoy from Domaine Economou. Both are blends of 80% Liatico and 20% Mandalaria.

As for whites, the Diamantakis Prinos 2009 (Malvasia/Chardonnay- 88 points), the Idaia Winery Vilana 2009 (100% Vilana – 88), Silva Daskalaki Enstikto White (50% Chardonnay/50% Vitiano-89) and Strataridakis Spinus Muscat (88) were my preference.

After the tasting, we were given a couple of hours to explore Heraklion. Exploring also meant lunch. Our posse of five headed to the waterfront, within full view of the ancient Venetian fort. Our destination: my favorite Gyro shop. The pitas were piled with high fatty pork, french fries, tzatziki, tomatoes and onions. Of course we had to wash our sandwiches down with Alfa beer and blue (can) Fanta, a Greek-only non-carbonated version of the famous orange pop.

A short stroll later and we found ourselves in Lion Square next to the Morisini fountain. This meant one thing: bougatsa. Said to have been brought to Heraklion by Armenian refugees, bougatsa is a phyllo pastry stuffed with either a salty cheese called myzithra or with custard, then topped with sugar. We choose the later and ask for cinnamon also. Bliss! Of course, no afternoon snack would be complete without a frappé, the national non-alcoholic drink. Take some instant coffee, add sugar, milk and water, then shake and pour over ice.

We return to the hotel, grab a quick shower and change of clothes, and board the bus to Alagani, the most mountainous village in the appellation of Peza. Lyrarakis winery is our destination. The 44 year old house originally sold their wines in bulk to other wineries all over Greece. They converted to estate bottling in 1992. The winery is also responsible for saving the ancient Plyto and Dafni grapes, which

almost disappeared in the 80s. My favorite whites were their Vidiano 2009 (87) and Dafni 2009 (86). As for red, it was the Kotsifali (87).

After departing Lyrarakis, we drove to the eighty year old winery of Douloufakis 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 (91), a 100% Vidiano, aged in a combination of acacia wood and French oak blew me away with its concentration, length and bouquet of vanilla, apple, citrus, flowers, spice and banana. Equally impressive is its confrère, the Aspros Lagos Red (90). Made from Cabernet Sauvignon, it is an opaque wine with aromas of cedar, cassis, plums and spice. My other selection was the 2009 Liatico (88), for its smoke, raisins, plum and cedar personality.

Dinner was in the mountains of Peza with many of the winemakers we had met earlier in the day. If the night before was a feast, this was excess. Dakos (Cretan bruschetta), beef and rice stuffed zucchini flowers/vine leaves, boiled greens/zucchini, horiatiki salad, a stew of snails/tomato/onion/bulgar wheat, braised rabbit, fried veal liver, roasted mouton with rice, roasted goat with tomatoes, and beef en papilotte with lemon potatoes was the hedonism. After the liposuction, there was a departing toast with Raki, or as I like to call it, lighter fluid. Being of partial Cretan decent, I was compelled to join in. Ouch.

Day 6

Nine-thirty in the morning found us at the Heraklion harbour boarding the Flying Cat 4 to Santorini. The catamaran is aptly named. It only took us an hour and forty five minutes to cover the 115 km distance.

There is no denying the beauty of Santorini. Once a large island, a massive volcanic eruption occurred circa 1600 BC, causing a good portion of the island to plummet to the bottom of the ocean, leaving behind the famous caldera and the grand views of the steep cliffs. It is this upheaval that has given rise to the myth of Atlantis being located here.

With the terrain being volcanic rock and the climate Mediterranean, it is hard believe that anything agricultural manages to thrive on the spartan, almost moon like terrain. Not the case. Capers, sweet baby tomatoes, fava/split peas, white eggplant, and of course the vine, notably Assyrtiko, do flourish.

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. It is the same winds that have resulted in the unique basket crowns used to grow the grapes. Since the terrain is dusty and full of sand and small rocks, it requires that the clusters be protected within the crown. If not, the shoots and grapes would become tattered, as well as sun burnt.

Thirty minutes after disembarking, we checked into our breathtaking rooms at Hotel Alta Mare, on the cliffs of the northern village of Oia. With a free afternoon to explore, we walk the maze of streets and alleys buying gifts for family members on our way down to the fishing town of Amoudi. Dimitris Taverna is our final destination. To our surprise, our waitress is Canadian. She has been living on the island for the past 22 years. The food did not disappoint. Our group decides to order mezze style, or if you will, a bunch of appetizers. The Santorini specialty, tomato fritters made from just harvested baby tomatoes were sublime.

Our only winery visit was in the evening at Gaia (mother earth). Owners Leon Karatsalos and Yiannis Paraskevopoulos first started to produce wine from island fruit back in 1994. Today, they also own a small winery in Nemea as well. The Thalassitis (the wine that comes from the sea) Santorini 2009, made from 100% Assyrtiko earned 87 points, the 2008 oaked version 89, and the 2009 Assyrtiko Wild Ferment (88). From Nemea, the Gaia S from 2008 and 2007, both blends of Agirotiko and Syrah earned 88 points, and the 2009 14-18h Rose, 87 points.

Before leaving we notice that the beachside lot which abuts the winery was being painted. Inside were a pool and six raised cages around the perimeter. We asked the winemakers what was happening. With chagrin, they tell us that it is being turned into an all night dance club. It will be interesting to see if the deep base vibrations will hurt the quality of the aging wines.

Dinner was at Saltsa restaurant in the capital city of Fira with the boys from Gaia and Boutari's Santorini operation. My singular wine with everything, from appetizer to fish to meat was the Boutari Kallisti Reserve Santorini (90), a barrel aged Assyrtiko. The concentration, weight and flavours handled the food easily. Tsikoudia, Crete's answer to Tsipouro, was the insomniac's drink of choice.

Day 7

Perched on one of the highest peaks over the caldera, the tourist delight known as Santos Wines awaited. Founded in 1947, Santos is the island co-op, and by law, all growers are members, regardless of size or stature. Agricultural pursuits are not solely restricted to grapes. Tomatoes, caper leaves, capers and fava 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 the grape 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 arrive on the mezzanine overlooking the azure sea, where five local wineries await. The dry wines were good, but my attention was drawn to the dessert specialty, Vinsanto.

Santorini has two OPAP appellations, one for dry whites and one for sweet whites. The appellation for dry wines calls for Assyrtiko, Athiri and Aidani. The sweet versions mandate Assyrtiko and Aidani. Reds are labeled as Vin de Pays.

Greek Vinsanto (**Vino Santorini**) is much sweeter and richer than Italian version. After harvesting, the grapes are laid on the terraces from whence they were picked and left to dry in the sun between 10 and 14 days. After fermentation, extensive barrel aging occurs. There is also Mezzo, a less sweet/dried version of the famed dessert wine. My favorite stickies were the 1999 Canava Roussos (88), 2004 Santorin...i (89), the 2006 Koutsogiannopoulos (88), 2003 Kavala (88) and the 4 year old Santo Wines (87).

A buffet lunch was served outside, including another round of fabulous tomato fritters. My wine of choice was the 2008 Santo Wine Santorini Grand Reserve 2007, a barrel aged 100% Assyrtiko made from 80 to 100 year old vines. It earned a solid 90 points.

The sweet feast did not end there. Arriving at Argyros for our afternoon appointment, we tasted through a whole array of Vinsantos 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. If any cross your path, do not hesitate to purchase. The dry white weren't too shabby either. The 2009 Assyrtiko Argyros garnered 88 points and the 2009 Estate Argyros, 90.

Our last visit of the island was at Domaine Sigalas, with the maestro himself, Paris Sigalas. Paris 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. Never one to rest on his laurels, Paris is always calculating how to produce better wines. One such decision was to start bâtonnage in 2002, as a means to give more depth to his whites.

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 his Santorini, going back to 2003, which proved this. We sampled the 2009 (91), 2008 (90), 2007 (89), 2006 (90) and 2003 (92). The latter was firing on all cylinders, 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 (92) and 2009 (90) oaked versions. Both showed an extra dimension thanks to the oak. The best reds of our entire island visit was his 2007 (89) and 2008 Mavrotragano (90), a red grape which Paris resuscitated from oblivion. Both offered oodles of fruit and structure, but the 08 had a little more depth. His Vinsanto's weren't too shabby either, the 2001 garnered 93 points and the 2004, 91.

Paris then guided us to his vineyards, to show his soil and vines, notably the crowns. He makes mention of the fact that phylloxera has never touched the island because of the high content of sand and lack of organic matter. All vines are planted on their own roots. Propagation, when needed, involves taking a branch of an existing vine, planting it in the soil, and when roots take foot, the branch is cut away from the mother plant.

We voyaged back to Oia to catch the mandatory Santorini sunset. Is there anything more stunning? An hour to relax and we were off for our final meal on the island. Dinner at Perivoli was an epiphany. I have never thought of Greek food as fashionable, but the chef here is applying French/fusion techniques to classic ingredients, elevating the humble to the sublime. Pea soup with fava bean marshmallow, marinated sardine on quinoa, 'Sheep's Head' fish with calamari served on squid ink potato, and the baby octopus with feta puree and Greek salad consommé were truly magical. Thankfully, the finale was Vinsanto. Indeed, it was a more saintly way to end the evening.

Day 8

We arrived in Athens on the early flight out of Santorini, checked in to our hotel, and became tourists at the Acropolis for a few hours. We then went down to the market area of Monasteraki for lunch and a few glasses of rosé.

One last tasting and dinner, this time with three producers from Sterea Ellada (Central Greece)- Hatzimichalis, Papagiannakos and Avantis. My favorites from Hatzimichalis were the 2006 Cabernet

Sauvignon (85), 2006 Merlot (86) and 2008 Kapnias Chardonnay (87). The Papagiannakos Red, an Agiorgitiko/Cabernet Sauvignon blend scored 87 and their pure Cabernet Sauvignon, a solid 90 points. As for Avantis, the 'M' Malagousia (89) was singing with flowers, spice, honey, orange and peaches. The 'M' Mavrokoudora, a rare tamer clone of Mandilaria garnered 88 points, and the 2007 Collection Syrah, 92. The latter was the best rendition of the grape I had tasted over the previous week. Dinner was full bore traditional, and yes, one last shot of Tsipouro for the road.

Final Thoughts

So where does Greece stand? Trying to pigeon hole Greek wine styles into the typical new world or old categories is nigh impossible. Yes, modern techniques are about, 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 the calling card of Greece 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, and after all, that is what Greek culture is all about.

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