

Memories OF THE FUTURE

ON SANTORINI ISLAND, WIZENED OLD VINES MAKE FOR BRILLIANT NEW DISCOVERIES. JOHN SZABO INVESTIGATES.



The volcanic island of Santorini rises abruptly out of the azure waters of the southern Aegean Sea, striking all who see it for the first time with its rugged, stunning beauty. Visitors arriving by boat to the port town of Athinios are welcomed within the sheltered bay of the caldera, a vast crystal blue water-filled crater that hints at the island's tumultuous geological past. Over 3,500 years ago, the volcano that formed the island erupted in spectacularly devastating fashion, creating tsunamis so powerful that many speculate they destroyed the entire Minoan civilization on the faraway Island of Crete over

100 kilometres to the south, while according to legend, simultaneously washing into the sea the lost city of Atlantis.

Any echoes of this violent occurrence are barely perceptible as you wind up the steep road from the port to Thira, the capital of Santorini at the top of the precipitous cliff overlooking the water-filled crater. Along this road you will see vineyards scattered here and there, tortured vines, twisted low to the ground in an effort to escape the constant buffeting winds, and looking as if they were recoiling from the relentless rays of the Mediterranean sun.

Santorini is a truly magical place, and from a connoisseur's point of view, the source of some of the world's most singular and distinctive wines. Atlantis aside, the indigenous white wine grape Assyrtiko is Santorini's greatest treasure, accounting for about 70 percent of vineyards on the island. It is considered Greece's finest white variety and is being rediscovered by savvy sommeliers and wine lovers around the world. It produces a wine as unique as the island itself: so pure and mineral-tinged as to taste like liquid volcanic rock. Subtle and powerful at the same time.

Assyrtiko is not a friendly, easily adaptable variety like Chardonnay, but rather one with a diva-like personality: difficult but irresistible. The grape is known for its electrifying acidity allied to a full-bodied and fiery alcohol character, low on simple fruity aromas. According to Nico Manassis, the author of *The Greek Wine Guide* and the person responsible for putting Greek wines back on the international map, "Assyrtiko stands head and shoulders above the rest, producing Greece's most striking white wines."

Another remarkable feature of this variety is its ability to improve with age, in a way that is almost unique for dry Mediterranean white wines. It is a grape loaded with dry extract, which gives it the stuffing to resist the ravages of oxygen that over time reduce lighter style whites to an oxidized, amber-tinged, caramelized character. The best



Assyrtiko are so rich in extract that they have an almost chewy, tannic texture that, tasted blindfolded, one could almost mistake for a red wine. The pH is also unusually low, sometimes below 3 (the pH level of most white wines ranges between 3.2 and 3.5 on a scale from 0 to 14 of the acidity or alkalinity of a solution), making the wine extraordinarily stable and able to develop a honeyed, mineral-tinged richness that recalls first-class Alsace Riesling, or in the case of wood-aged versions, grand cru Burgundy, after eight to 10 years in the bottle.

There are several traditional styles of wine produced on Santorini. One of the most historic and evocative is Vinsanto, a late harvest, partially sun-dried grape sweet wine which predate Italy's now more famous version. It is in fact believed that Italian Vin Santo owes its name to this once-popular "vino di Santorini" that was shipped regularly to Italy by the Mediterranean-dominating Venetian traders. The European Union seems to agree, as Greece has been awarded the exclusive use of the term Vinsanto as applied to a quality wine produced from a specific region (or "VQPRD" in EU parlance). Vin Santo in Italy, by contrast, cannot stand on its own but must be associated with a specific region to qualify as an official quality wine.

The unusual Nykteri is an increasingly popular style, produced in this case from ripe, but not overripe grapes. The name, which means "working the night away" refers to the short period of maceration which lasts no longer than a day,

and presumably a night. Most use oak barrels for aging nykteri, and alcohol is often high, hovering around 15 percent. These are serious wines.

The most common styles of wine found today take full advantage of modern winemaking techniques. Grapes are harvested earlier to bring down alcohol levels to a more modest 12 to 14 percent, pressing is done in gentle pneumatic presses, and fermentation occurs in temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks.

The results, however, lack nothing of the distinct character of typical Santorini, merely a less extreme and more commercially appealing style. Many producers are also experimenting with the use of new oak barrels for part or all of a particular wine. The combination of high extract and acidity of Assyrtiko seems to lend itself well to barrel aging, with oak aromas integrating well with the pronounced minerality. Though I personally prefer 'naked' versions, I have nonetheless tasted several versions that have made me a believer, especially after a few years in bottle have brought it all together.

At the seventh Thessaloniki International Wine Competition held this year in March, our panel of Greek and international judges were uniformly impressed by the full range of these stunning wines. Knowing only the grape variety for each flight of wines served (with producer and origin concealed), the Assyrtiko-based Santorinis stood out with their inimitable



character, lifting our spirits and setting our imaginations alight, causing us to daydream about each wine's origin from a parched piece of sun-drenched rock. It is increasingly rare in today's world to encounter wines that speak so clearly, elegantly and unmistakably about their origins, and for a panel of sometimes-jaded international wines judges a find like this can't help but stir some excitement and renew faith in the concept of terroir.

But such uniqueness comes at a price, as not everything is idyllic on this island paradise. Today, tourism is a double-edged sword for the inhabitants of Santorini. The island's near-perfect climate and natural beauty draw thousands of visitors each summer to its shores. The lure of easy living through the tourist trade threatens to destroy traditional agricultural practices, not least of which is winegrowing. Indeed, winemaking to outsiders must seem more like an endurance sport, a test of will or perhaps merely stubbornness, and not surprisingly the younger generation on the island is less enthusiastic about carrying on with the hardships of that tradition. Hotels and condo developers are snatching up land at an alarming rate, reducing the amount of prime parcels under vine. A century ago, there were over 4,000 hectares of vines on the island; today that number has shrunk to one quarter.

How Assyrtiko not only survives but also manages even to grow on Santorini remains mysterious. There is virtually no fresh water on the island and rainfall is scarce, next to zero

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during the summer growing season. The few rare springs are hardly considered for crop irrigation, as even water for the inhabitants and tourists alike must occasionally be brought in by boat. Some growers speculate that the early morning dew that forms just before sunrise is sufficient to keep the vines alive. Then there is the soil itself: volcanic lava, with virtually no organic matter. It is not clear where the vines find the necessary nutrients. In order to reduce competition between

vines, vineyards are planted at low density, increasing the space between each plant to allow their root systems to penetrate and draw from a larger area. Even weeds are naturally discouraged to grow in this extreme environment, meaning that the majority of vineyards are ipso facto organically farmed — there is no need to apply any herbicides or insecticides, nor are mould, mildew or rot a problem. Phylloxera, too, finds Santorini inhospitable, so that vines are planted on their own roots.

According to Konstantinos Lazarakis, currently Greece's only Master of Wine, "most vineyards are cultivated as they were 200 years ago. In general, Santorini is trouble free."

The vine growing system is also unique in the world. Here, each year, the new shoot growth is woven into a circular, basket-like structure, creating a protected environment in which vines can flower with less damage from constant strong winds, and grape bunches can develop without the excessive sunburn caused from the bunch exposure that is offered in most conventional trellising systems. This means that each vine is back-breakingly low to the ground and tractors are of no use here. When Lazarakis was researching his book, he came across a grower who had attempted some conventional trellising. "He went to check his vineyard after the first spell of wind and he drove past the block without noticing... The whole thing, posts, wires and vines were found several hundred metres away, in a big ball..." All this effort for yields of about 20-25 hectolitres per hectare, or less than half of what one could expect from high quality vineyards under less severe conditions.

Thus if it weren't for the extraordinary quality of these wines, viticulture on Santorini would be but an historical footnote. "More incentives must be given to maintain the vineyards. Let's keep what we have," insists the passionate wine journalist Manassis. He fears that the co-operative winery on Santorini, which crushes over half of the island's harvest and is therefore the most important producer in terms of volume, is not performing at the level they should be. "They need to raise their standards for the overall success and survival of the appellation."

Fortunately, there is a handful of producers who are capable of extracting the maximum expression from Assyrtiko under these tortuous conditions. Among the names to watch out for are Sigalas Vinsanto and both the barrel- and stainless steel-aged Santorinis, Gaia Estate's Thalassitis, Hadzidakis Nykteri, Argyros Estate and Boutari's Kallisti cuvee.

For those seeking a more moderate but nonetheless excellent expression, Assyrtiko has since been planted in other parts of Greece from the Peloponnese to Drama near the Bulgarian border, with generally good results. On the mainland the grape takes on a slightly more fruity aromatic profile with less minerality. It has proved successful as a blending partner with other, usually more aromatic varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc or more interestingly, the perfumed indigenous variety Malagouzia.

As consumers, however, we must do our part to ensure the survival of the specialty of Santorini, if the wines are not to go the same way as the fabled lost city of Atlantis. Consider this as you picture the fiery red sun setting over lava cliffs of the Caldera, sinking into the now deep blue waters of the Aegean, glass of Santorini in hand, of course.

