

The white wines of Greece

By Eric Asimov

It's so easy to fall into a wine-drinking rut. We all have wines that we enjoy and look forward to for just about any occasion or type of food, so why even think about choosing a different bottle?

I get it completely. Some people never tire of exploring France, so never daydream about vacationing in Spain. My own two sons, my own flesh and blood, might consider altering their orders in a Chinese restaurant - but they never do. Not that there's anything wrong with that. It's just that we are living in a golden age of wine drinking, where so much pleasure is to be had from so many different parts of the world that I find it a shame not to branch out occasionally.

In this spirit of exploration I give you the white wines of Greece, which at the very least will expand your perspective on the popular genre of cool, crisp, refreshing wines that immediately improve any Mediterranean-style meal. You know the type: wines that are lively and unpretentious, that smack of sunshine, white-washed walls and seafood. They are made to be drunk young and they come most often but not exclusively from Italy, France, Spain and Portugal.

Greece simply offers a subtly different take on these familiar wines. But it's a great different take, with unfamiliar, indigenous grapes grown nowhere else. From the windswept volcanic island of Santorini in the Aegean Sea comes the assyrtiko grape, which produces dry, deliciously mineral wines. The assyrtiko vines, by the way, are trained in little bushlike circles that hug the ground, both to protect them from the wind and so that they can absorb the morning dew on this largely dry island.

From the Peloponnesus comes the pink-skinned moschofilero grape, which produces highly floral wines that can often have a rosy tinge



A visitor walks past old wine-making equipment exhibited at the Antoniou winery near Fira on the island of Santorini, Greece. (Yannis Kolesidis for The New York Times)

to them. And there are so many others, like the ancient athiri, the light, citrus-imbued roditis and the textured savatiano. Of course, this is the modern world, so Greece has a growing proportion of non-indigenous grapes, like sauvignon blanc and chardonnay, but so far they play a supporting role.

The wine panel last tasted Greek wines four years ago, at the time of the Athens Olympics, and since another summer Olympics is about to begin it's time to revisit them. So much has changed and improved.

In 2004, we had to taste both whites and reds to get a full complement of wines. This time we had no trouble finding 25 bottles of white wine. Last time we found too many bottles that tasted tired from languishing on store shelves (always an issue with unfamiliar wines) or that were overpowered by the struck-match smell of sulfur dioxide, used as a preservative but best in amounts too minute to notice.

This time, fewer bottles were dragged down by sulfur, and freshness was not an issue. For

the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by the husband-and-wife team of Scott Mayger, the general manager of Telepan on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and Beth von Benz, a senior wine buyer at Zachys in Scarsdale, New York. We were all impressed with the variety of flavors.

"They're all about summer, freshness, communal eating and all that one envisions going along with that," Scott said. Beth got even more specific.



"Lemon, capers, fish, tomatoes," she said before trailing off, thinking as well, perhaps, about all that goes with communal eating. I think maybe I haven't spent enough time in the Mediterranean.

Our No. 1 wine was the 2007 Tselepos moschofilero from

the Mantinia region of the Peloponnesus, an unusual yet delicious wine that smelled like roses and tasted like grapefruit. The 2003 was one of our favorites four years ago. Back then I said it reminded me of gewürztraminer, and I can still see that today. Our No. 2 wine, the 2007 Ktima Pavlidis Thema, comes from Macedonia in eastern Greece, near the city of Drama, and is a combination of assyrtiko and sauvignon blanc. Together

they produce a floral, earthy wine with flavors of minerals and lime.

We were all big fans of the moschofilero wines from the Peloponnesus, including the 2006 Antonopoulos; the 2007 Boutari, which was also our best value at \$12; and the 2007 from Domaine Skouras. Incidentally, Greece uses a French-style system for appellations, including French-language designations. The Skouras, produced outside the

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boundaries of the Mantinia appellation, therefore receives the appellation Peloponnes.

Our No. 6 wine, the 2007 Sigalas assyrtiko Barrel from Santorini, so-called because it is barrel-fermented in the manner of chardonnay, was the most expensive wine in the group at \$33. While it might be easy to deride a wine like this as pretentious, it was in fact well done, taking on a lush, smoky richness. By contrast, another 2007 wine from Sigalas, made from 70 percent assyrtiko and 30 percent athiri and without the oak treatment, was simply clean and refreshing.

A number of these wines are surprisingly low in alcohol, 12 percent and under, which is rare for a dry wine these days. The Antonopoulos was 11.5 percent and the Boutari and the Skouras were 11 percent. Frankly, it's not something that you think about when drinking these wines, but it does make them all the more appealing in the sun.

I mentioned that fewer wines had sulfur problems, but one was a wine that I've grown fond of, the Gaia Thalassitis, an assyrtiko wine from Santorini. I'd made the 2006 a staple in my fridge and had found the citrus, honey and mineral flavors attractive at any time of the year. But in our blind tasting, I marked down the 2007 for having too much sulfur.

I happened to have a bottle of the 2007 at home and opened it to check again. It, too, was burdened by a sulfur aroma. Even after decanting and waiting 10 minutes, it remained. I may wait for the 2008s.