

Greek wines seek to regain mythical status

ARGOSTOLI, Greece (Reuters) - Many consumers, when they imagine Greek wine, think with a shudder of retsina: a cheap white wine flavoured with pine resin served to generations of package tourists. But Greece has a longer winemaking tradition than its more famous European neighbours.



Visitors harvest grapes at a vineyard in Pallini, a few kilometres from Athens September 14, 2008. Many consumers, when they imagine Greek wine, think with a shudder of retsina: a cheap white wine flavoured with pine resin served to generations of package tourists. REUTERS/Yiorgos Karahalas

In the sun-bathed vineyards outside Argostoli, where the fictional Captain Corelli wooed his love Pelagia, the descendants of a real-life Italian soldier are conducting their own love affair with Greek wines.

The wines of Kefalonia -- a verdant island in the sparkling waters of the Ionian sea -- were once prized across the Mediterranean, before centuries of colonisation, war and poverty brought Greek winemaking to its knees.

Now the small Gentilini vineyard, run by a distant relative of a 16th-century Venetian commander, is part of a new generation of winemakers using unique local grape varieties to put the country's vintages back on the map.

"Other people can make Chardonnay. We want to take Greek grapes and stretch them a little, try something new," said manager Petros Markantonatos, tanned from a long day harvesting.

With just 10 hectares (25 acres) of vines, Gentilini prides itself on handcrafting its wines.

The vineyard uprooted the last of its Chardonnay and Sauvignon vines last year, replacing them with Kefalonia's native Robola grapes for crisp whites with floral and citrus tones. Its reds, made mainly from the local Mavrodaphne and Agiorgitiko grapes, are full-bodied, chocolaty and spicy.

"These are not sissy wines!" said Petros's wife Marianna Cosmetatos, whose father founded Gentilini in 1982. "What we fight against is bad wine: 'wannabe' boutique wineries that throw money at the market, not quality."

Viticulture arrived here around 4,000 BC from the Middle East and the seafaring ancient Greeks spread the cult of the wine god Dionysus across the Mediterranean. But wine-making languished as most of Greece

became a neglected province of the Ottoman empire.

While aristocratic winegrowers in France and Italy competed for prestige, vineyards here remained small and peasant-run during more than a century of wars after independence in 1832.

Things began to improve in the 1960s when growing prosperity

Greece has a longer wine-making tradition than its more famous European neighbours.

Compared with European heavy weights France and Italy, Greece's production remains tiny.

allowed people to spend more on wines, and the 1980s saw the emergence of a new generation of small producers. But Greek winemakers know they have to make up ground.

"Unless the word Greece gets accepted, it's very hard to get Gentilini accepted," said Marianna.

At the vineyard's outset, schoolgirl Marianna had to bring yeast for fermentation in her suitcase from England when she returned for the holidays. These days, Gentilini is at the forefront of blending Greek grape varieties to create new wines.

"We don't make any money making wine but we have fun trying!" joked Marianna, hugging her two-year-old

daughter.

Compared with European heavyweights France and Italy, Greece's production remains tiny. Its output slipped to 3.5 million hectolitres last year, less than 2 percent of Europe's total.

This contrasts with another resurgent European producer. After years of successful marketing, Spain's exports grew by 12 percent in

Litsa Kourenta head of wine at the Agriculture Ministry said the Greek government has a three-fold strategy to nurture the industry.

2007 and it is tipped to oust France soon as the world's top producer with over 50 million hectolitres.

Litsa Kourenta, head of wine at the Agriculture Ministry, said the Greek government has a three-fold strategy to nurture the industry. Firstly, under an EU scheme to improve wine quality, it is paying farmers to uproot old and diseased vines.

Second, it is subsidising the husbandry of the remaining vines and finally, promoting exports of Greek wines through marketing campaigns, such as a recent one in the United States.

"The problem is Greek wines are not cheap because production is so frag-

mented," said Constantine Lazarakis, author of "The Wines of Greece", saying a good bottle costs around 10 euros. "Italian wines are far cheaper. Medium-cost Greek wines are excellent value, but they don't yet have a good reputation."

Germany remains the most important destination for Greek exports, but new markets are gaining ground such as Britain, the United States and Russia, with its growing middle-class.

"Greek wine is getting a better name with experts but that's not yet enough to redeem the bad impression with consumers," said Lazarakis, saying a fifth of Greece's 600 wineries were making top quality wines.

"Changing the wine experience of visitors to Greece is essential," he said, suggesting the industry should target the 15 million holidaymakers who visit the country each year.

HERCULEAN LABOURS

In the Nemea valley at the heart of the Peloponnese, where Hercules performed the first of his 12 labours, lies Greece's largest wine appellation, home to the Agiorgitiko grape.

Lying around 600 metres above sea level, the Domaine Helios estate produces wines that are acidic, fruity and low in alcohol, at around 11 percent, due to its high altitude.

"People are surprised when they taste our wines because they expect hot-country wines and they don't get that," said Anne Kokotos, who founded Helios with her husband eight years ago. "A lot of Greek vineyards are high up and have an old world style."

Agiorgitiko -- named after Nemea's patron, St. George -- is a versatile grape used for fresh reds, but also for wines for ageing, like the vineyard's garlanded Grand Reserve. Part of a new breed of Greek premium wines, it has cherry flavours, soft tannins, and sells at around 25 euros a bottle.

The deadly wildfires that ravaged the Peloponnese last summer left a smoky smell on some grapes, making them unsuitable for winemaking. But otherwise, conditions have been excellent.

"Last year's wine was very good and this year should be even better," said Kokotos, surveying the rows of vines stretching to the Corinth Gulf. "We have perfect conditions for winemaking."

The deadly wildfires that ravaged the Peloponnese last summer left a smoky smell on some grapes, making them unsuitable for winemaking.