

# GREEK WINES

## of long lineage return

Spring is in the air. It's the season for renewal. New beginnings. So let's start fresh with two words that you might not think go together: "Greek wine." Clear your mind of all of that associative clutter -- amphorae, jugs, ouzo, retsina, "opa!" -- and focus instead on the notion of unique and sophisticated sippers, as tasty as anything from Western Europe but more affordable.

"I think of Greece as being a very old wine producer with a very new wine industry," says Mimi Martin. A wine educator and co-owner of The Wine & Spirit Archive, Martin has traveled extensively in Greece and taught classes on Greek wine.

Greece was a prolific wine region in classical times, exporting its wine as far as its ships could sail. But under subsequent rulers such as the Byzantines and Ottomans, commercial winemaking went "into hibernation," Martin explains. Wine became a homemade commodity, hand-traded by the jug between rural farmers.

Then, when Greece joined the European Union in 1981, the children of rustic village vintners traveled to France to learn modern methods of winemaking. They returned to their home vineyards with French grape varieties such as merlot and cabernet sauvignon, and began making, barreling and bottling serious wines.

Now that Greek winemakers are comfortable with the quality of their work, they have returned to indigenous grape varieties, making the same sorts of alluring wines that Aristotle and Alexander the Great once sipped.

A big, fat Greek label lesson

The good news first: The Greek alphabet has largely been banished from the high-quality table wines exported to the United States. Now the bad news: No one can agree on how to spell Greek wine terms using the Latin alphabet.

So -- unless you're a journalist -- forget about trying to spell the titles of Greek wines. Instead, focus your energy on properly pronouncing them. Here's a quick rundown of a few of the major grapes:

Agiorgitiko (ah-yor-YEE-ti-koh): lush red, which also goes by the easy-to-say nickname "Saint George"

Assyrtiko (ah-SEER-ti-koh):



mineral white  
Moscofilero (mos-koh-FEE-ler-oh): citrusy white  
Roditis (roh-DEE-tis): white and rose  
Xinomavro (ksee-NOH-mah-vroh): floral, spicy red  
(Note: To hear native Greek speakers pronouncing Greek wine names, check out the excellent

Web site  
[www.allaboutgreek-wine.com](http://www.allaboutgreek-wine.com).)

Martin's two favorite varieties are assyrtiko and xinomavro. "Both have tremendous complexity," she says. "Xinomavro is very similar to a nebbiolo; it has tremendous aging potential and shows all kinds of aromas and flavors, such as red earth, licorice, tar and floral notes. Assyrtiko is a white wine that can also age; it shows a lot of mineral character and also floral notes in addition to fruit."

As for the white, pink or red tape that tops most Greek wine corks, that's a seal of approval guaranteeing that the liquid inside meets the criteria of its appellation of origin. Plunge your corkscrew right through it and twist away.

### Five to try

"One thing that is amazing about Greek wines is that they tend to have a lot of acidity to them even though the climate is really hot," Martin says.

In the sun-soaked Peloponnese, for example, "The best vineyards are at high elevation on north-facing slopes, which is pretty unique for a Northern Hemisphere winegrowing region."

What does this mean? Well, that acidity makes these terrific food wines, so bring on the small plates. I'm thinking of the mezes (that's tapas in Greek) that taste so good in the springtime as the weather warms: almonds, cucum-



ber-yogurt salad, fava beans, grilled octopus, fresh cheeses, hummus, pita (of course) and lamb meatballs.

2007 Skouras Peloponnese Roditis -

Moscofilero (\$10): Like vin de pays from France, Peloponnese wines tend to be inexpensive but tasty table wines, Martin says. Crisp, light and refreshing with citrus and mineral notes, this one fits my Greek-wine fantasy:

Something that would be best sipped at a beachside shack, accompanied by some fried squid. (This producer also makes a lovely white that's 100 percent moscofilero; a bit more elegant and floral, it sells for about \$18.) Find this wine at Great Wine Buys; Haggen Oregon City and Tualatin; Liner & Elsen; Market of Choice Terwilliger; and New Seasons Markets Cedar Hills Crossing and Raleigh Hills.

2007 Boutari Santorini (\$19): The assyrtiko grape of Santorini (the southernmost island in the Aegean) makes a weighty, fragrant white wine that Martin likens to viognier. This bottling sourced from a 300-year-old (!) vineyard has a decadent mouth feel, with notes of minerals and figs. Find it at Barbur World Foods; Fred Meyer Hollywood West; and New Seasons Markets Happy Valley, Raleigh Hills and Seven Corners.

2006 Skouras Nemea Saint George Aghiorgitiko (\$15): The lush red agiorgitiko (aka Saint George) grape is often blended with French varieties such as cabernet sauvignon -- which seems a waste, because this wine is so interesting on its own. I decided that this example smelled and tasted intriguingly like a plum-based barbecue sauce. "I

think it's pretty nicely balanced," Martin observed. "The fruit is really bright for a wine that is coming from such a hot region." Find it at Allegri Wine Shop, Fred Meyer Burlingame and Hawthorne, Great Wine Buys, Liner & Elsen, Market of Choice Terwilliger and New Seasons Markets Cedar Hills Crossing and Mountain Park.

2004 Domaine Karydas Naoussa (\$24): According to Martin, the red xinomavro grape grows best in Naoussa, a wine region on the high-altitude slopes of Mount Vermion in Macedonia (the region of northern

Greece just south of the nation by the same name). Martin loves the delicate complexity of the Domaine Karydas, finding aromas and flavors of strawberries, dried cherries and violets. Released after five years of maturation, this beauty has a brick tint and some earthy, savory notes that call for a pairing of wild mushroom risotto. Find it at Allegri Wine Shop, Liner & Elsen, Market of Choice Terwilliger and Zupan's Raleigh Hills.



NV Kourtaki Samos Muscat Sweet White Wine (\$13.50):

Of the many sweet dessert wines produced in Greece, the fragrant muscat-based whites from the Aegean island of Samos are the best known. These can be quite inexpensive if slightly fortified (as this one is); the costlier ones are made from dried grapes. According to Martin, there's a big market in France for these after-dinner drinks, and a sniff and a sip reveal why: "It just has so much natural perfume to it," she points out. With notes of honey, dried and fresh apricots, raisins, flowers and cinnamon, this is a dessert in and of itself; no baklava required. Find it at Bales West Linn Thriftway Marketplace and Fred Meyer Hollywood West.

