

Nectar of the gods

As Greek wine slowly makes headway in the UK, **Erin Smith** investigates Hellenic winemaking techniques and the country's prospects for the future

Greek wines historically have struggled to gain a serious foothold in the UK with importers and the broader trade. But with suppliers and the on-trade increasingly looking to differentiate their offerings, more are turning to the wine paths less travelled and Greek wine ticks many of the boxes.

Indigenous grape varieties that are now being used to produce exceptional quality wines, even with hard-to-pronounce names, are beginning to gain ground here and further afield. But behind the UK shift in sentiment and a growing appreciation for wines coming out of Greece, there has been a lot of hard graft to get to this point.

Old prejudices

One of the challenges Greek wine has had to overcome in the past few years is breaking through the massive generalisation that all wines taste similar to the famous and Marmite-esque retsina wines of the past.

"The first knee-jerk reaction I still get when I try and introduce Greek wines – even to people in the UK trade – is 'I hate retsina'. I can see a lot of people in the UK wine business that still think like that," explains Konstantinos Lazarakis MW.

But, Lazarakis points out, while this may have been true decades ago, this could not be further from the reality of what is happening in Greece today.

"In the past few years there has been a re-emergence of retsina and there are some amazing producers crafting it. It is not just that Greek wine is so much→

more than retsina, but even now retsina is on the same plane as wines like fino sherry or Jura wines.”

Sebastian Payne MW, who was the chief wine buyer at the Wine Society and still oversees buying of the Greek wine category, among others, agrees that Greek wines are changing.

“I think what would surprise people who used to drink Greek wines in the old days, is that the wines are clean and fresh. These producers are making beautiful wines and even make a fantastic retsina which is unrecognisable compared with what was drunk way back when I went there as a student,” says Payne.

Lazarakis admits another reason that wines have perhaps not gained massive amounts of traction in the UK is because there simply isn't that much wine to go around.

“My theory is the Greek wine industry has been extremely introvert for centuries because Greek wines could easily be sold in Greece. To put it in perspective the whole of Greece produced less than half the volume of what Bordeaux produces. On top of that, we drink most of our own wines, so only 20% of that goes to exports,” says Lazarakis.

Steve Daniels, buying director at Novum Wines, agrees that the wines were always destined to be more niche. “Greek wines will never be mass market because the wineries are small and there are not many really big players. Because there weren't any big co-operative producers price has always been an issue. So most supermarkets have never really been that interested. That is where the mass market really goes for their wines and that remains true today,” he says.

Co-founder Yiannis Paraskevopoulos of Gai'a Wines, which has a winery in Nemea in the Peloponnese peninsula and a winery on the island of Santorini, has successfully built a strong export business, but agrees that some producers lack of focus beyond Greek shores probably has contributed to the wines generally being less well known. “Greeks don't really do marketing and that has always been a challenge,” he says.

Pronunciation problems

The indigenous grape varieties can also be tough for consumers to pronounce, but for many if the quality is there, that challenge can be overcome.

Payne says: “The names are reasonably difficult to pronounce compared with Australian or South African wines. I guess this could mean these wines will never be massively popular, but that is not a problem because the volumes produced are not colossal either.”

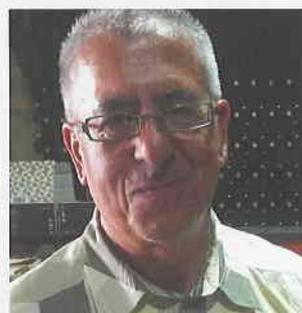
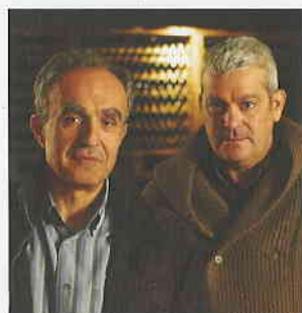
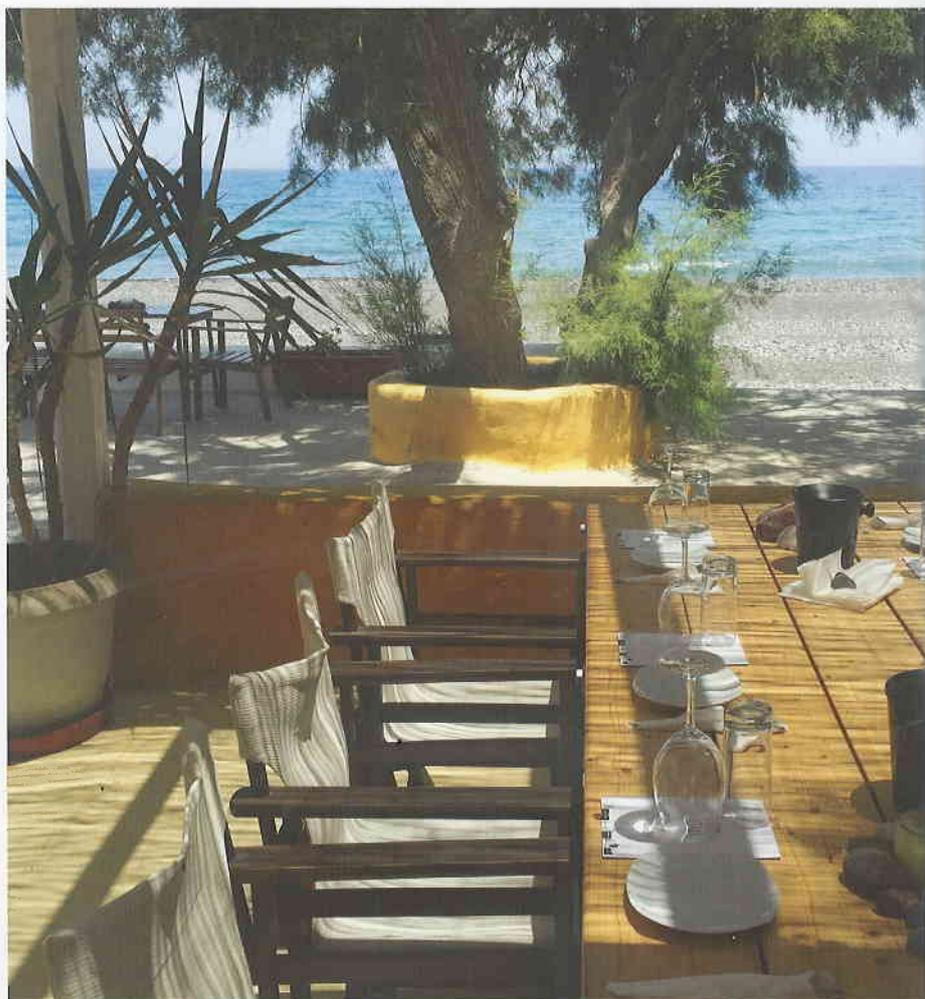
While indigenous varieties can be a mouthful and may have slowed the uptick in popularity of Greek wines, it is also a point of difference.

Younger consumers in particular are no longer put off by such challenges and are often looking to discover new uncharted territory when it comes to wine.

“While of course there is still prejudice, I also think that people are much more wide awake. More people travel – particularly younger generations – and with so much information out there these days people are not scared of these things,” says Payne.

Santorini and the easy-drinking Assyrtiko wines from the paradise island have quickly become a favourite among the sommelier crowd.

“The sales are very healthy at the moment. This is being led by Santorini wines – it is an easy story to tell, the wines are world class and sommeliers love



From top: Gai'a Wines' tasting room in Santorini; Leon Karatsalos and Yiannis Paraskevopoulos, Gai'a Wines; George Tsibidis, Monemvasia Winery

them. The on-trade has really helped push the envelope and is really supporting it. I think most of the decent restaurants in London nowadays have a Santorini offering,” says Daniel.

Quality first

The biggest step change that has helped to push Greek wines forward is the importance now placed on producing the best quality wines possible.

While the winemakers and the techniques applied in the cellar are as mature as most top wine-producing regions, what has been lacking and that is now being addressed is the focus on what is happening in the vineyards.

“In terms of winemaking they are really switched on. Where the biggest improvements will come will be in the vineyards. In the past I think producers perhaps have taken for granted what they were getting. Now they are really looking at the vineyards and identifying the varieties that work,” explains Daniel.

Along with Paraskevopoulos, George Tsibidis the founder of the Monemvasia Winery in Velies has made significant investments in improving the overall quality of the wines they are now producing.

Paraskevopoulos says: “I can tell with certainty in the winery now we know what we are doing. It took us years to learn exactly how to work with [red grape variety] Agiorgitiko. Obviously there is a bit of fine tuning, but we are also concentrating much more on the viticulture and tending of the vines.”

As part of that work, Paraskevopoulos has spent



From top: Monemvasia Winery in Velies; Sebastian Payne MW, the Wine Society; Konstantinos Lazarakis MW, wine educator; Steve Daniels, Novum Wines

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Sebastian Payne MW

the past eight years focusing on clonal selection for his vines as one avenue to help improve the quality and combat more recent effects that climate change is having.

Specifically the earlier rains, the lack of maturity of the polyphenols and the thin-skinned Agiorgitiko grape have been a tough combination. But Paraskevopoulos is banking on the fact that the right clones used in the vineyards can help combat these challenges and take the quality of his wines to the next level.

“We did not produce an estate wine three times in the past ten years because of weather. So clonal selection for us will be huge.”

When Tsibidis started the Monemvasia Winery in 1997 he experimented with 35 different varieties that were local to the region, which has a rich wine history. He then narrowed down his focus and half of his planted vines are now the rare and old Kidonitsa variety.

“I believe in this wine which is why I planted half of my vineyards with it. But it is tough to grow and the vinification is tough as well, but it adds to the complexity of the wine. I have not yet cracked it completely, but the 2015 harvest was a big step forward,” explains Tsibidis.

It is the relentless focus of producers such as Tsibidis and Paraskevopoulos on constantly looking at how to improve the quality of wines that is paying off.

“The quality of the wines has really improved which has helped massively. Greek wines for us have grown from basically nothing in the past five years to something. It is not the biggest thing on our list, but it is well worth having and the wines are worth it,” says Payne.

Lazarakis is optimistic about the future of Greek wines: “I can only see Greek wine getting better and better.”

Daniel agrees: “Even though it’s an ancient country it has a modern wine industry. I think Greek wines will only continue to get better – no doubt about it.”

GREEK WINES GO NATIVE

While the pronunciation may be tough when it comes to Greek wines, indigenous varieties from around the globe have grown in popularity among suppliers and sommeliers in recent years in the UK. However, while other countries produce wines that could parallel more commonly consumed varieties, Greek wines stand out.

“Suddenly we have seen more people looking to see what is unique about Greek wines. A lot of European countries are playing the ‘indigenous grape variety’ wild card, but believe me some of these wines taste just like a Chardonnay or Cabernet. Uniqueness is not a concept, it is something that you should get in the glass that leaves you thirsty for more. That is what counts,” says Konstantinos Lazarakis MW.

There has been a change among smaller and younger wine producers who have embraced the winemaking heritage and local varieties of Greece.

According to Sebastian Payne MW: “What we found is that although there are some very good older producers, there are a huge number of very keen younger growers. There has been a big change in the past 20 years from when larger producers were making wines for the domestic market using international varieties. That is fine, but there is no point in us buying a Sauvignon from Greece when you can get that from all over the world.”

The popularity of Santorini as a tourist destination paired with great wines has helped to make the island’s native Assyrtiko far more popular with consumers. “Wines like Assyrtiko are fantastically good. They aren’t base price either, but people go on holiday and they love the wine,” explains Payne.

Lazarakis is even seeing more obscure varieties being asked for by consumers in the US where Greek wines have been even more successful. He says: “Though a number of people in the UK have been turning toward Greek wines, in the US they are really doing well.”

“People who are asking for Santorini, Nemea and Naoussa wines are so last year. Now they want Mavrodaphne and Kidonitsa. It is this kind of mind frame that we need to convince people that Greek wine is fantastic.”