

Peloponnesian report - Monemvasia

28 Apr 2010 by Julia Harding MW

See [Greeks not resting on their laurels](#) for my introduction to this trip around the Peloponnesian and [Welcome to Greek Week](#) for links to related reports.

Now we are way down in the southernmost prefecture of the Peloponnesian: Lakonia, as famous for its Kalamata olives and oil as for its vines, though the drive to re-establish Monemvasia as a world-famous sweet wine could well tip the balance back in favour of wine. As you drive down from Mantinia, there are mountains - some still snow-peaked in the March sun - on both sides, the Taigetos to the west and the Parnonas range to the east.

The island of Monemvasia (just off the south-east coast of the more easterly of the two southern prongs in this map) was separated from the mainland by an earthquake in 375 AD, though I confess that I hadn't even realised it was an island because it is always referred to as a port and for some reason I don't expect ports to be islands. As it turns out, it wasn't a very good port and a more sheltered inlet slightly further east along the mainland was preferred. It's a stunning place to visit, think Carcassonne but smaller and more densely packed, surrounded by water, more genuine (the Archaeological Society rules here) and less touristy - not that it is short of tourists in the summer - with history deep in every dressed stone and uncut rock. Actually, don't think of Carcassonne. Strenuous efforts have been made to find the owners of the ruined houses that were abandoned after the second world war and to see them rebuilt in their original style and materials. As no vehicles are allowed on the island, all building materials and equipment have to be carried by mule. House prices are appropriately high.



The settlement on the island was founded by the Byzantines... but as this is an article about wine, not about history, see www.monemvasia.com for more information.

Highly respected Greek viticulturist-ampelographer Dr Haroula Spithiropoulou notes that 'During the Byzantine period a lot of Greek wines traveled under the name of their origin. One of the most famous was the Malvasia wine produced in the area of Monemvasia. After the Turkish occupation the production of Malvasia was transferred to Crete.' It is also clear that even before that, Crete was a useful staging post on the way to Italy and further afield because wines exported via the island attracted lower taxes than those exported directly from Monemvasia.

There is much debate about the varieties that went into these wines and whether it was just one variety or a blend but most experts seem to agree that it was a blend. There is certainly no consensus and there appears to be no firm evidence but there's no shortage of debate. Incidentally, Spithiropoulou's research in 1999 with Professor Stavrakakis of Athens University found very little relationship between the ancient varieties of Monemvasia and those called Malvasia Something in Italy.

To clarify the nomenclature: **Monemvasia** (derived from two Greek words *monē* and *emvasi*, meaning 'single entrance') is the name of the island off the south-eastern tip of the Peloponnesian and the name of a grape variety, the latter presumably named after the former. The English referred to the port as Malmsey, the French as Malvoisie. **Malvasia** is a grape variety (several, in fact) and the name given to a style of sweet wine made from a blend of varieties, probably Kidonista, Asproudi and Monemvasia. To make matters worse, Asproudi, meaning 'little white', is the name used for many different white varieties in Greece and often for a field blend of those varieties.

The history of these vines and wines and their relationship with what is planted in the region today has been the spur to many a symposium and is way beyond the scope of this short article. Instead I'll look at the wines currently being made by two producers inspired by this same history and, more importantly, by the quality potential of the region and its native varieties for dry and sweet wines.

(For anyone who reads Greek and wants to know more, see Stavroula Kourakou- Dragona's book *I poikilia ambelou malvasia kai oi kat' onoma malvasies* (The grape variety Malvasia and the so-called Malvasias), which is based on the proceedings of an international conference that took place in Athens 19-20 May under the title 'Monemvasios Oinos- Monovas(i)a- Malvasia' (Wine of Monemvasia- Monovasia- Malvasia).)

VATISTAS



Yiannis Vatistas (pictured here with his son Theodoros) comes from a family of farmers (on his father's side) and fishermen (on his mother's side) so it seems appropriate that so many of his vineyards look out to sea near Neapoli, almost at the tip of the south-eastern prong of the Peloponnesian, even further south than Monemvasia. He first started planting vines on his family land in 1986 and now has 30 ha of vines on the hillsides of Pantanassa and on the plain of Vion. Soils are varied but there's a great deal of limestone and red iron-oxide-rich soils.

He bottled his first wines in 1990 and has worked since 1996 first with pioneering Greek oenologist Mary Flierianos and now with her son Yiannis. Vatistas was the first to bottle wines in the region, where wine has been made since Byzantine times, and is besotted with and driven by this land and its potential. Vatistas does have some international varieties (eg Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet and Merlot) but his focus is on indigenous vines (not all local), specifically Petroulianos,

Asproudi, Thrapsa, Mavroudi, Monemvasia, Kidonista, Roditis and Mandelaria as well as Assyrtiko, Aidani, Athiri, Agiorgitiko and Malagousia. Like George Tsiibidis from Monemvasia Winery (see below), he is on a mission to see the historic wine known as Malvasia recognised with its own appellation and a worldwide following.

The local variety Kidonista has been encouraged locally thanks to a subsidy to plant it but, with no subsidy to help market it, that's rather a dead-end encouragement.

Vatistas Kidonista 2009 Regional Wine of Monemvasia 17 Drink 2010-14

Vines planted 1996 and 1997. Massal selection from local wines. First vintage 2000.

Greener fruit character than the Monemvasia Winery bottling - more quince and less mineral. Slightly reductive.

Same chalky texture, powerful and more citrus on the palate. Fresh acidity. Deeper and weightier. Then more aromatic on the mid palate, perfumed. Protean. 12.9% (JH)

Vatistas Malagousia 2009 Regional Wine of Monemvasia 17 Drink 2010-13

Vatistas took cuttings from Queen of Malagousia Roxane Matsa and planted them in 2001.

Quite closed on the nose, not as aromatic as usual. Slightly floral on the mid palate. Very juicy and crisp for this variety. Honeyed with a smooth texture. Much fresher than many and only lightly aromatic. Long and pure. Dry and quite powerful. TA 5.5 g/l, 13.1% (JH)

Vatistas 2009 Regional Wine of Lakonia 16.5 Drink 2010-11

Mainly Kidonista, plus Asproudi, Assyrtiko and Petroulianos. Bottled 6 weeks. He was first to plant Assyrtiko in the region - it tends to be richer here compared with Santorini.

Fresh and delicately limey and strong mineral note and slightly herbal. Very clean and fresh and limey and a hint of orange zest. Smooth and crisp and very refreshing. Slight chalky texture. The acidity from Kidonista and Assyrtiko. Strong stony aftertaste and then the citrus comes back on the finish. Good depth and length. TA 5.3 g/l, 13% (JH)

Vatistas Cabernet Sauvignon/ Agiorgitiko 2006 Regional Wine of Peloponnesian 16 Drink 2009-12

50/50 blend. Cabernet planted in 2000. A year in French oak, 50% new. Sells well in the US (\$16-20).

Bright ruby. Black fruited cassis nose, slight reduction or minerality. Oaky spicy, dry but smooth tannins, showing nice maturity. Peppery, touch of capsicum. Very slightly herbaceous but not green. Slightly chalky texture, quite a lot of sweet oak spice but finishes fresh. RS 1.2 g/l, TA 5.3 g/l, 13.4% (JH)

Vatistas Petroulianos 2009 Monemvasia 16.5 Drink 2010-11

Planted in Vion. A very difficult variety to cultivate. Barrel fermented and 3 months in oak, not yet bottled. Vatistas rediscovered this variety, which he separated out in the vineyard. Identity confirmed by DNA analysis.

Pale lemon colour. Strongly lemon nose and a little mineral. Vines facing the sea and very close, at 120 m. Dry, dense and pure citrus. Powerful and clean. Oak not really visible. Tight and lightly mineral on the aftertaste. Intense. Sweetness of alcohol is noticeable. 13.5% (JH)

Vatistas Thrapsa 2009 Regional Wine of Lakonia 16 Drink 2010-12

A clone of Thrapsathiri. Out of tank today. No oak.

Very deeply coloured. Spicy. Dark and red fruit like Petit Verdot when fully ripe. Fresh, not quite ripe damsons. Papery dry tannins and sweet red fruit on the palate. Baking spice on the finish. Very distinctive and aromatic fruit. Floral and cherry. Mouthwatering finish. 13.3% (JH)

Vatistas NV Sweet Dessert Wine of Greece 17 Drink 2010-15

If the appellation changes take place next year, as they hope, this will be labelled Monemvasia- Malagousia. Currently it has no official appellation. Assyrtiko, Petroulianos and Malvasia blend. Dried one week in the sun. 6 years in small oak (topped up).

Deep orangey gold. Rich orange and ginger compote nose. Intense dried apricots. Barley sugar. Fresh acidity, lots of bitter orange and apricot. Intense and fresh finish. More intense and complex on the nose than on the palate. Viscous but with a slight chalky catch to the texture. Grip and acid give freshness and a light yet attractive bitterness on the finish. RS 148 g/l, 14.8% (JH)



MONEMVASIA WINERY

Founded by George Tsimbidis (right) in 1997 in the town of Velies, north west of Monemvasia, following a successful career as a nuclear physicist and nightclub owner, with the clear and ever-present - almost obsessive - mission to revive the sweet wines of Monemvasia. George doesn't do things by halves. He confessed to having once been a 100- cigarette- and 2- bottles- of- spirit- a- day man and he definitely has a gleam in his eye when it comes to Malvasia (the wine, not the variety); all the other wines are just part of his ascent towards the Holy Grail of Monemvasia-Malvasia. He has worked closely with the Universities of Thessaloniki and Athens in research on the local varieties and their vinification, all with this one objective in mind. A proposal for a new appellation for these historic sweet wines is awaiting approval. He says the appellation will be called Monemvasia-Malvasia but I find this hard to square with the EU aversion to the potential confusion of variety and designation of origin.



The name of the wine has become a very complicated affair since there are now many varieties, notably in Italy and Spain, called Malvasia Something. But local fanatics insist that historically Malvasia was a style of wine and a blend of several varieties, probably not always the same ones, not a single variety. The jury is still out on which varieties the ancient wine was made from but there is a strong suggestion that out of the 25 identified in local vineyards by agronomist Haroula Spinthiropoulou, the most likely candidates are Kidonista, Asproudi and Monemvasia (similar to the dry Monemvasios blend below). However, since series of symposia are dedicated to this subject, I am not going to attempt to reach a definitive conclusion here.

One of the remarkable things about Tsimbidis' wines is the unforced concentration he has managed to achieve even though most of the vines are just three years old.

Monemvasia Winery Kidonista 2009 Regional Wine of Lakonia 17 Drink 2010-12

Cultivated in Lakonia not just in Monemvasia hence the regional wine designation. 6 ha of 3- year- old vines. Fermented in stainless steel. *Kidonista* means 'quince', *kidonitsa* therefore 'little quince', referring to this characteristic aroma and flavour in the wine. Bottled today!

Restrained on the nose some peach, verging towards apricot. Chalky texture, fresh dry, highly textured. Long mineral finish and becoming a little more spicy as it opens up in the glass. Remarkable concentration for such young vines. Apparently it becomes more mellow and subtle as it ages in the bottle. RS 1.9, TA 5.15 g/l, 12.7% (JH)

Monemvasia Winery Asproudi 2009 Regional Wine of Monemvasia 16.5 Drink 2010-12

Bottled today. One of the old varieties discovered among the 16 identified in local vineyards. *Asproudi* means 'little white' and unfortunately it is used all over Greece for several different varieties and sometimes for a field blend of varieties. It had practically disappeared because its early ripening and tall vines and consequent attractiveness to the birds made it unpopular with growers. However, it was rehabilitated by the research institute in Athens. Picking from 15 Aug. 3- year- old vines. Tsimbidis planted a block of 1.5 ha so that birds eat round the edge.

Planted on the flank of the mountain and east to west so gets lots of sun. On well- drained limestone schist.

Touch of orange blossom and orange zest and spice on the nose. Intense and spiced on the palate. Powerful at the front, mineral aftertaste. More linear on the finish. Sweet in the middle. Rich. TA 5.25 g/l, 12.8% (JH)

Monemvasia Winery, Monemvasia 2009 Regional Wine of Monemvasia 16.5 Drink 2010-12

Monemvasia is a variety not just a place - vines brought from Paros by George Tsimbidis. Naturally high yields. Picks the grapes still green for the sweet wine. Now exists here and in Paros. *Unoaked*.

Smoky spice and touch of honeyed sweetness. Reductive, mineral. But a hint of something floral too. Highly spiced on the palate, Fresh and powerful, lots of spice on the tongue. Very slight resin note on the nose too. Slighter on the mid palate than the Kidonista. Light chalky texture again. Tightness and line showing its limestone terroir. TA 5.2 g/l, 12.6% (JH)

Monemvasia Winery, Monemvasios 2009 Regional Wine of Monemvasia 16.5 Drink 2010-12

30% Kidonista, 30% Monemvasia, 10% Asproudi, 30% Assyrtiko, all planted at 200 m in Velies.

Smoky bacon. Smoky on the palate too but less so. (Wild forest fires?) More citrus underneath. High acidity and savoury aftertaste. Very long finish. Makes you want food. TA 5.4 g/l. 12.8% and slight warmth on the finish. (JH)

Monemvasia Winery Assyrtiko 2009 Regional Wine of Monemvasia 16 Drink 2010-11

5- year- old vines in Velies.

Lovely mineral Assyrtiko nose. Lemon and lemon blossom and lemon drops, more aromatic than Santorini. Fresh, moderate intensity on the mid palate, clean and fresh maybe lacks some persistence. Slight grip. Shows youth of vines more than the others. TA 5.5 g/l, 12.6% (JH)

Monemvasia Winery, Laloudi 2009 Regional Wine of Peloponnese 16 Drink 2010-11

Laloudi means 'flower'. He didn't really intend to plant *Moscophileros*. He had permission to plant 10 ha by a certain date and couldn't get enough of what he had planned, so he has 0.7 ha of this.

Intensely aromatic. Highly floral and rose- scented. Honeysuckle and jasmine. Still fresh and dry. Harvested 15 Sep. Dry and a bit short. All upfront. Chalky texture. Total 9,000 bottles. TA 5.4 g/l, 12.7% (JH)

Monemvasia Winery, Fileri Rosé 2008 Regional Wine of Peloponnese 16 Drink 2010-11

A black berry and a clone of *Moscophileros*. Grown on the slopes of Paronias mountains. This has 10% *Agiorgitiko* from own vineyards.

Very deep reddish pink. Incredibly sweet red fruit. Red plums. Very very sweet red fruit, but only 2.4 g/l. Very sweet red fruit but fresh. Fruit bomb and full of flavour. (JH)

Monemvasia Winery, Maleatis 2005 Regional Wine of Monemvasia 16.5 Drink 2009-13

A 50/50 blend of *Agiorgitiko* and *Mavraki* (thought to be identical to *Mavroudi* though not yet proven by DNA analysis).

Sweet meaty dark fruit. Thick and sweet and rich and lots of sweet oak spice. Velvety, youthful. 6 months in new oak. Soft red cherry. Lovely ripe fruit then those local chalky tannins. Sweet oak and sweet fruit but balanced by the tannins. *Mavroudi* has thick skins. Harvested end Sep. Mid ripening. Lovely sweet dark plum fruit. TA 4.9 g/l, RS 2 g/l, 13% (JH)

Monemvasia Winery, Monemvasios 2005 Regional Wine of Monemvasia 17 Drink 2009-13

90% *Agiorgitiko*, 10% *Mavraki*/ *Mavroudi* planted at 200m in Velies. *Paronias* mountain range protects from warm winds from the south. New oak for 18 months.

Bright black cherry colour. Very pure fruit, cherry but also spiced damson. Lovely firm grainy tannins and great freshness. Pure, fine grained. Fine oak spice on the finish but not overpowering. Fresh and long and energetic. *Mavroudi* adds kick and structure. TA 5.25 g/l, RS 2.34 g/l, 13% (JH)

Monemvasia Winery, Laloudi 2005 Regional Wine of Peloponnese 17 Drink 2009-13

100% *Agiorgitiko* planted at 200m in Velies, certified organic. (All their vineyards are organically farmed but the proximity of their non- organic neighbours disqualifies some of their land from organic status.)

Dark sweet oaky cherry nose. 12 months in new oak. Vanilla laced peppery cherries. Juicy, fluid, fine grained and velvety tannins with just a slight chalkiness on the finish. Fresh and long and still so youthful. TA 4.88 g/l, RS 2.19 g/l, 13.3% (JH)

Sweet wines



We then tasted three vintages of his prototype Monemvasia- Malvasia, all still in barrel and not yet commercialised. They are a blend of 75% Monemvasia and 25% Kidonista. All the grapes are harvested late as they start to shrivel, then dried on racks in the sun for 10 days. The varieties are then pressed, fermented in stainless steel and aged in small oak barrels (these ones). They ferment one half first and then add in the second half once the fermentation has started. He is thinking of using a solera system to create the final blend but as yet the wine has no legal status because it has no appellation. These embryonic wines look very promising for the renaissance of this historically world- famous wine.

2004 17 Drink 2012-20

Light burnt amber colour. Still has lots of dark ripe apricot. Touch of burnt caramel and some nuttiness. Sweet perfumed toffee on the palate and fresh finish even with all the sweetness. Fragrant dark orange and toffee apricot on the palate. Very long. RS 150 g/l, 13.5%

2003 17 Drink 2012-20

A little more savoury and walnut on the nose than the 2004. Less fruit sweetness. More spice, still has that dark marmalade note. Hint of cherry. A little less fresh than the 2004 and a little darker. Hint of liquorice. RS 155 g/l, 14% (JH)

2002 17.5 Drink 2012-20

Less aromatic than the 2004 and 2003, more restrained. More delicate. More savoury and more burnt caramel though you still get those brown un sulphured apricots on the palate. Lovely freshness and loads of orange on the palate. Intense and powerful, less friendly than the 2004. Mouthwatering finish. RS 160 g/l, 15% (JH)

2001 17.5 Drink 2011-20

Light burnt amber colour. Nutty smoky restraint though still complex and intense. Really lively fruit and freshness on the palate. Juicy apricot palate. All utterly unctuous. But gets more silky with age and less primary. RS 165 g/l, 15.5% (JH)