

Rajat Parr's Blog

Sounds Like Greek to Me

Posted: 04:18 PM ET, September 12, 2007

“Do you like Assyrtiko?”

“What is that? It sounds Greek.”

That’s what I said five years ago, when I first heard about this indigenous white grape, which can be traced backed to 1000 B.C. in Santorini. Now I’ve just come back from my first trip to this amazing Aegean island.

Santorini is one of the rare winemaking areas in the world not attacked by phylloxera, because of the high content of sand found in volcanic soil. Because of their resistance to phylloxera, most of the picturesque vineyards that cover the island are more than 100 years old and retain their original rootstocks.

The porous volcanic soil of Santorini allows the earth to retain water, giving the vineyards the ability to stay nourished during the high summer temperatures. During the hot Greek summers, rains are extremely rare, and the only source of water for the vineyards is the nocturnal fogs. After the evening sun sets, the island becomes enveloped in a fog that comes in from the sea. The vines are able to retain the water they need from this evening fog and use it during the warm daylight hours when it is needed most.

Assyrtiko has the ability to preserve its acidity while keeping a high alcoholic content. The variety produces a bone-dry wine that has citrus aromas mixed with the characteristic earthy flavors provided by the volcanic soil of Santorini.

On my recent trip to Santorini, I discovered the great wines of Domaine Sigalas. I was traveling with Laura Perez (my partner in Parr Selection) and Ted Diamantes (owner of Diamond Wine Importers, which imports Domaine Sigalas).

Domaine Sigalas was founded in 1991 by Paris Sigalas. Initially, Sigalas made his wine at the converted Sigalas family home. In 1998, a new vinification, bottling and aging facility was built in Oia, in northern Santorini. Today, after investments in technology and modernization, the current production capacity is more than 29,000 cases annually. Since 1994, Domaine Sigalas has participated in an organic farming program and cooperates with the DIO certification organization for organic products.

Sigalas produces two versions of Assyrtiko, one in stainless steel that is racy, lemony and has very high acid, and another that is barrel fermented. This wine is rounder and softer, but still has acidity that will compare to the firmest Rieslings from Germany.

What really surprised me about the barrel-fermented version was its amazing similarity to Sémillon. In youth, the wines seemed lemony and racy with firm acidity, but after four to five years of age they developed waxy flavors with layers of lemon custard, honey, lanolin and mint. The wines were very rich and dense. The 2000 and the 2001 had the flavor profile of a great white Bordeaux or Hunter Valley Sémillon. One of the bottles of the 2001 had been open for three days, but showed no sign of oxidation.

How come nobody talks about these wines? They should be in the cellars of everyone who enjoys great white Bordeaux. And the prices are unbeatable, at \$20 to \$30 retail.

Domaine Sigalas not only produces this fine white wine but the original *vin santo*. Apparently the Italians learned the technique from Santorini. Now that's a trivia question!

To learn more about Greek wines, read Kim Marcus' article, "[Greece at the Crossroads](#)," and watch his video, [Greek Traditions, Modern Wine](#).

2 comments on this post

Reader Comments

User Name: John Miller, Windsor, CA Posted: 05:01 PM ET, September 12, 2007

So glad to hear you talk this way about about Greek wines, and particularly from Santorini. I visited Santorini several years ago and had some very excellent wines, especially the whites. I think most people really don't know about these wines, but those of us oenophiles who enjoy going off the beaten path do. The Vin Santo trivia is interesting, but not surprising. Just one more thing the Romans stole from the Greeks ;^)

User Name: Filippo Recchi, Florence, Italy Posted: 03:49 AM ET, September 13, 2007

Dear Rajat,

I'll go ahead and start looking for the Domaine Sigalas here in Italy...

Regarding the Vin Santo trivia: the name Vin Santo (literally Holy Wine) as far as I know has two stories, and none has proven to be the real thing yet. One is when the Patriarch of Costantinopoli visited Florence for the Ecumenic Council in the 1400s: he tasted Vin Santo (already made around here) and declared it tasted like the wine from Xantos (another Greek island), hence the name Vin Xantos->Vin Santo (I guess the translation sounded pretty good at the time). The other origin is that Vin Santo is made from grapes that are left to dry for months and then pressed during the Holy Week (the week beafore Easter), hence Vin Santo (Holy=Santo in Italian).

That said, the Tuscans must have learnted somehow or from someone how to make Vin Santo.....