

### NOT TO BE SNIFFED AT

The delicious dry rosé of Santo Wines



**F**OR Plato the philosopher, Santorini was the former site of the mythological lost city of Atlantis. For wine historians, Santorini was where European wines were first made, evidenced by the recent discovery of amphorae, grape seeds and drawings depicting winemaking.

When I visited Santorini recently, local wine was furthest from my mind though I did overhear fellow sun-seekers mention the island's wineries. By chance, after an afternoon's sailing, I was handed a "quaffing wine" dispensed from a humble wine carton to accompany mezzes – Greek finger food. It could have been the beauty of the setting sun or the balmy breeze, but the wine tasted delicious. Upon further examination, I found the source – Santo Wines Dry Rosé – 20 litres of it. My interest was piqued. If wine in a box tasted this good, the bottled wines should certainly be worth investigation. Thus began my wine journey of Santorini.

#### Art Space

The first stop is Art Space – an art gallery and winery, housed in a series of caverns carved out of pumice rock. It is run by Antonis Argyros whose great-great-grandfather built the winery. Several generations later, it was sold. Recently, Antonis bought back the estate, and today he displays an eclectic modern collection of 40 Greek artists amongst winery paraphernalia and underground wine storage vats.

"To understand Santorini wine, you must first know its history," explains Antonis. "Around 1650 BC, one of the world's largest volcanic eruptions occurred here. The island was blanketed with volcanic ash, lava and pumice stone. The 'soil' turned out to be quite ideal for farming grapes. Phoenicians probably brought the grape to Crete and Santorini – and the first wines of the European world were made.

"What's a winery without wine to taste," Antonis utters as he whips out a bottle of Vin Santo di Santorini. The wine is sweet and luscious – like a cross between a Tokaji and a mead. Compared to Italian Vinsanto, Antonis explains that Greek Vin Santo is an abbreviated version of Vino di Santorini and that the Italian Vinsanto was inspired by the Greek original.

"The wines of Santorini were, and still are, made from Assyrtiko grapes. With intense flavours, the Vin Santo were the only wines to last long sea journeys, even if they oxidised along the way."

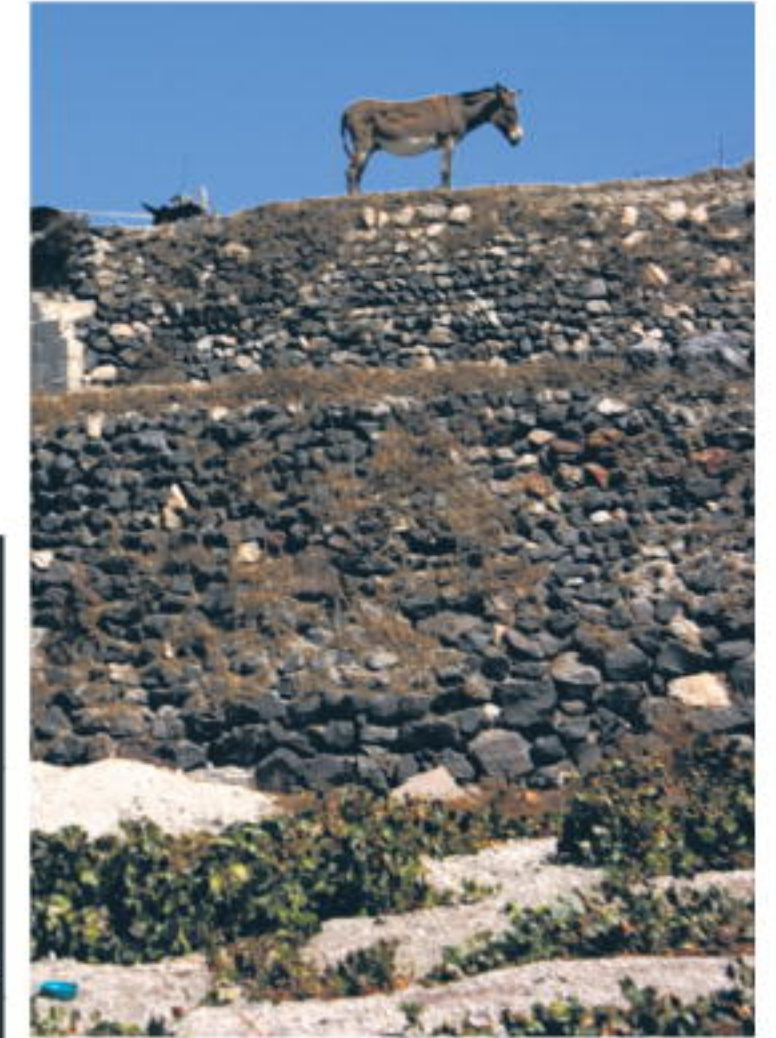
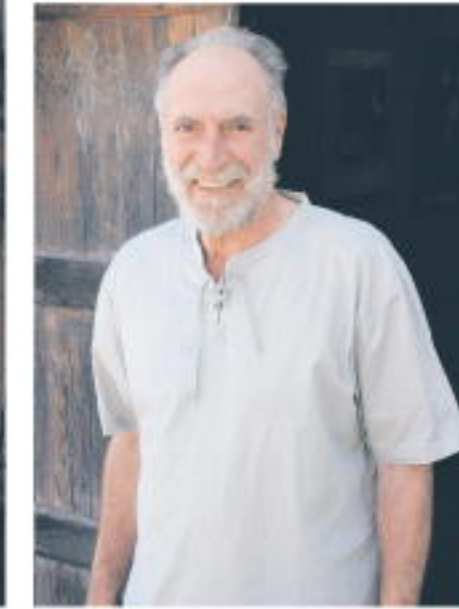
There's more to Santorini than white-washed Cycladic houses against a backdrop of blue skies and azure Aegean waters. The island's wines are among the finest in Greece and are slowly but surely gaining a worldwide following.

By Edwin Soon



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– Antonis Argyros (below), owner of Art Space (left)



#### HIGHLY REGARDED

At the topmost point of Santorini, near the village of Pyrgos, is the award-winning Hatzidakis boutique winery (above)

## A sip of sunshine

#### Hatzidakis

Next stop, at the highest point of Santorini island and near the village of Pyrgos, is the boutique winery that Haridimos Hatzidakis started in 1997. The cellar door wall is adorned with various Thessaloniki International Wine Competition awards and *Decanter* magazine certificates.

Eleni Alevra, oenologist and assistant to the winemaker, puts Greek winemaking in context: "Language barriers, unfamiliar native grape varieties with difficult-to-pronounce names and Retsina, the resinated wine, probably kept good Greek wines in Greece. Just 20 years ago, Greece began its wine renaissance. Winemakers studied and worked abroad, then returned to develop vineyards and wines."

Haridimos had once worked for large wineries before stepping out on his own. Eleni is hoping to follow in his footsteps. She recently gained her qualifications in oenology in France and came to work the harvest because she felt Haridimos was one of the best winemakers in all of

Greece. At Hatzidakis, the grapes are farmed organically. Soils gain nitrogen content from bird lime and the only other organic matter comes from grape pomace (stems and pressed grapes after processing). Wines are fermented by indigenous yeasts – a common practice in many high-end wineries around the world.

We taste a floral-citrus tasting Aidani (white varietal) wine, perfect for seafood. Then Eleni pours four versions of Santorini's most famous white varietal – Assyrtiko. The first is simply labelled as Santorini Dry White and it is crisp and fresh; the next, called Cuvee No 15, is impressive, complex with a delicious mineral saline quality and finishes long, like a Loire white destined for cellar ageing. Then comes the Santorini "Barrel Fermented" and it resembles a Chardonnay, with lovely wood integration so that the wine tastes subtle. And there is a fourth – Nykteri, which takes its name from the Greek word meaning "night work", referring to a procedure in which the processing of grapes

from vineyard to fermenter takes place entirely in one day, finishing late at night.

The Hatzidakis Nykteri is a little different in that it is oak aged and comes across as rich, mineral and juicy with 15 per cent alcohol. What a chameleon grape Assyrtiko is! Finally I taste a red wine called Mavrotragano – and it is reminiscent of a fine Nebbiolo. The wine has cherries, and is earthy with leather aromas. Impressive – hopefully, the rumours about eliminating red varietals from Santorini aren't true.

#### Domaine Sigalas

The cellar door of the third winery, Domaine Sigalas is helmed by two Greek ladies. One is Maria Georgomauoli from Athens, who after completing her Masters at the famous German viticulture and wine school Forschungsanstalt Geisenheim, decided she would return to Greece to make wine. The other is Stella Vassilaki, who left Crete to study oenology and agronomy in Bordeaux and came recently to work at Sigalas. She too felt she wanted to be part of an important period in the development of Greek wines.

It doesn't take long for them to convince people about the uniqueness of wines made in Santorini. A 10-minute tour of the vineyard demonstrates that climatically, Santorini is hot and dry. Vines are untrellised, so grapes are shaded from the sun. An interesting feature is that they are not grown into bushes as in the hot regions of Australia or California. Instead they are "woven" into a basket – called "kouloures" for additional protection from the intense heat and winds. If the vol-



canic soils do contain some moisture brought in by nocturnal fogs, it is their composition – with high content of sand – that kept phylloxera away and history intact. Many vines on Santorini are 100 years old, bearing original rootstocks.

Back in the cool tasting room, the ladies offer an Assyrtiko-Athiri blend, with mineral nuances and acidity. A Santorini (Assyrtiko) 2003, unoaked, round, warm and full bodied, reveals bottle bouquet notes of honey and peach. Next, an oaked 2007 Santorini version brings exotic pear-lime-vanilla notes to the mouth.

Stella pours me a red wine called Ni-amiteao – a blend of the tannic Mandalaria grape and the soft fruity Pelleponese grape called Agiorgitiko. The wine is subtle with aromas of small red fruits; it is bal-

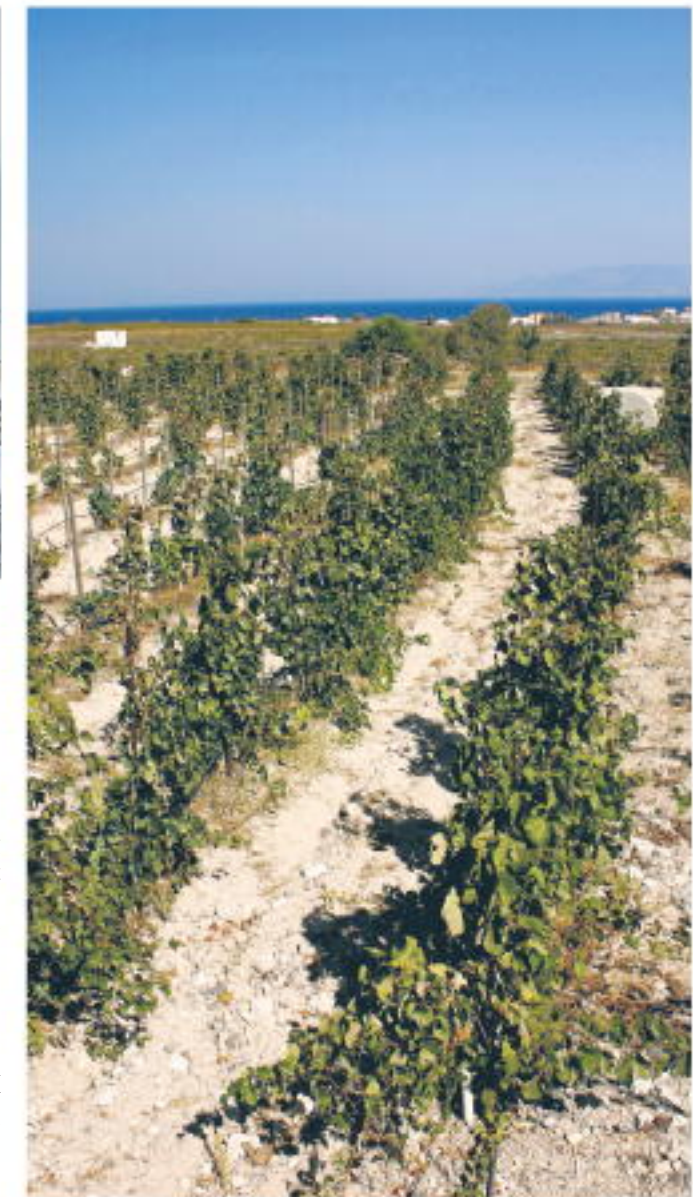
#### CHILLING OUT

At Domaine Sigalas (right), the vines are untrellised so that the grapes are shaded from the sun. After a tour of the vineyard, visitors can quench their thirst in the cool tasting room (above)

anced with fine tannins and finishes long – reminiscent of a Red Burgundy. The last wine is Mezzo Apeleotis (100 per cent Mandalaria) – an unusual sweet red wine with a hint of raspberries, rich in texture yet dry tannins.

Stella and Maria send me off with a list of other Santorini wineries to visit – Argyros Estate, Boutari, Gavalas, Ursula Deneke and many others. But as in any great vacation, there's never enough time to do it all.

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#### CIRCLE OF LIFE

An old vine is given a new function as a wall decoration. Vines in Santorini are not grown into bushes as in the hot regions of Australia or California. Instead they are "woven" into a basket called "kouloures" for additional protection from the intense heat and winds

PHOTOS BY EDWIN SOON