

A Big Fat Guide to Greek Wine

Everything you need to know

by [Kate Soto](#), April 7, 2016

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The Greeks have always been trailblazers. While the ancient Greeks were busy inventing such trifles as indoor plumbing, medicine, democracy, and the foundations of Western thought, they were also spreading a vibrant wine culture throughout the European mainland. The Greeks may not have invented wine, but they placed it squarely at the center of their social interactions, and imbued it with cultural rituals that survive today. It was a drink for rich and poor, an accompaniment to political discussions and celebrations; it even had its own god and its own appellation system. In fact, it's been at the core of Greek society for at least 4000 years.

But it's not all ancient history. Not only does Greece have a deep winemaking tradition from which to draw, there's a vibrant scene currently brewing. This is an era of evolution for Greece, and a period of enthusiasm, reinvention, and experimentation in wine. The vinous sea change started 30 years ago. Two-thirds of the population lived in small villages before World War II, where people made their own wine and were suspicious of bottled versions. The country became more urbanized in the 1960s, and a few big companies began churning out cheap plonk for mass-consumption. After centuries of war and poverty, this cultural industrialization spurred an identity crisis in the wine world. Talented winemakers such as George Skouras of Nemea (an appellation in the Peloponnese—one of the most well-known and important winemaking regions), who'd had formal training in France, began to return home to ply their trade with domestic vines. This ignited a renaissance that improved quality and introduced the idea of the boutique winery, a very active part of the current wine industry.

Today, quality is at an all-time high, but recent economic turmoil means much less of it is being drunk by Greeks who have little disposable income. So, wineries are turning

their attention to thirsty U.S. consumers, and this is a boon for imbibers keen on refreshing, minerally, and complex wines. Exports to the U.S. shot up 40 percent in the last year alone, and it's likely that this trend will continue. The question is, how does one navigate the labels when the regions and native grapes may be, well ... all Greek to us?

Regions to Know

Mountainous, varied, and formed by volcanic activity over millennia, most Greek vineyards have been organically farmed since before organic was even a thing. With both mountain and sea breezes cooling down vines, grapes develop zippy acidity and maintain a sense of freshness regardless the winemaking style. There's amazing raw material—over 300 indigenous varieties, plus a decidedly human scale: like in Burgundy, Napoleonic laws have kept landholdings small and fragmented, meaning that most winemakers are working intimately with tiny parcels. They're vinifying naturally as Greece is too mountainous to mechanize—so producers do things the old school way, as they've been doing it all along. Though the terroir varies between its two peninsulas and 3000 islands, there's a through line in the wines that's consistently Greek in character—as Skouras summarizes, Greek wine is "freshness, beautiful acidity, clean style. Real wines."

NORTHERN GREECE: MACEDONIA AND THRACE



Vines in Macedonia. [Image via [Shutterstock/Goran Kuzmanovski](#)]

Northern Greece borders Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Turkey, and houses the peaks of Mount Olympus, the famous home of ancient gods. Wines from this region have a cool climate elegance, and are much less ribald than their southern counterparts. Some Bordeaux varietals do well here, but the native xinomavro ("acid black") is really where the action is at. Often called Greece's nebbiolo, xinomavro finds its spiritual home in the appellation of Náoussa. It's difficult to cultivate and persnickety, fiercely tannic and high in acid, but taming the beast has plenty of rewards. Its aromas evoke a well-loved kitchen: black pepper, plums, sun-dried tomato, olives, baking spices. It can age for eons; in fact it's at its best after being tempered by time.

For an example that doesn't require a decade, try the 2012 Kir-Yianni "Yianakohori Hills" (\$17), which blends xinomavro with merlot and syrah for earlier approachability. Founder Yiannis Boutaris is from the Boutaris family, a winemaking group with roots that date back to the 19th century. Today, his son Stellios is at the helm. This bottle could use a decant, so open it up at least a half hour before you dig in.

THESSALY/EPIRUS



Thessaly, Greece. [Image via [Shutterstock/Anton_Ivanov](#)]

Circled by the Pindus mountain range, this region has not historically been known for its viticulture, but a recent resurrection of the ancient limniona grape in Tyrnavos has injected new life into its winemaking. Christos Zafeiraki of **Domaine Zafeirakis** rescued it from virtual extinction, and produced the first single-varietal wine from the grape in 2008. The 2012 bottling (**\$19**) is delicious. Deeply aromatic with pretty black cherry, rhubarb, and fig notes on the nose, it broadens to a naturally voluptuous body. It's silky, spicy, and gobs of fun. The domaine also creates a rare rose version, **Domaine Zafeirakis Tyrnavos Limniona Rose** (**\$12**), that's softly strawberry scented, and perfect for springtime sipping.

CENTRAL GREECE



Athens, Greece. [Image via [Shutterstock/Inu](#)]

Athens is one of the world's oldest cities, and the country's most populated. It lies in Attica, the region that is also the home to retsina, the much-misunderstood (and often maligned) modern form of resinated wine. Ancient Greeks loved pine resin's preservative powers, when oxidation in clay amphorae was a huge concern. Eventually, they developed a fondness for its zesty, herbal character, and it's still a popular aperitif. It's made mostly from the savatiano grape, occasionally with roditis and assyrtiko. When done well, it can be subtle and refreshing. [Kourtaki](#)'s non-vintage version (\$9) shows bright hints of lemon, rosemary, and sage. Kourtaki is a family-run establishment dating back to 1895, and they are the standard bearer for this type of wine.

On its own, savatiano is remarkably rich, something akin to a chenin blanc. [Mylonas Winery](#) makes a savatiano (\$13) that exudes golden honey, white flowers, apricots, then stoney notes as it gains air, showing eucalyptus and sage. All along, it maintains that beautiful Greek acidity.

PELOPONNESE



Peloponnese, Greece. [Image via [Shutterstock/Lev Levin](#)]

The Peloponnese is very likely one of the first places on earth to grow grapes and make wine in any kind of systematic way. Archeologists have learned that there's been viticulture here for at least 4000 years—maybe 7000. This is the southern tip of the Balkan peninsula, and its heart is Nemea, one of the wine capitals of the country. With mountains up to 3300 feet, valleys, and ragged shorelines, winemakers in this region are blessed with remarkable, varied terroir. According to Skouras: "The altitude gives beautiful differentiation. A lot of sun and hot days, but the vineyards are placed on mountains that are the 'refrigerator' of our land. We get wind from the sea, which eliminates humidity, so there's no need for pesticides. Soils are calcareous, limestone, rocky. There's no irrigation. Everything is made by hand."

Two wines reign supreme. The agiorgitko grape is Greece's most widely planted dark skinned grape. **Skouras** calls it polydynamic, because it can make roses, fresh reds, aged reds, and even dessert wines. Its general characteristics are velvety, round, red fruits, sweet spice, violets—quintessentially Mediterranean. Try Domaine Skouras Péloponnèse Moscofilero (**\$15**). Moschofilero is a high-acid pink-skinned grape that makes gorgeously floral, aromatic wines with zip. Think gewürztraminer meets

sauvignon blanc. Skouras's pink-skinned grapes go through a unique dry ice maceration that imparts a luscious body and ripe citrus under notes of blossoms. Try Domaine Skouras Nemea Agiorghitiko (\$15).

THE ISLANDS



Santorini, Greece. [Image via [Shutterstock/Luxerendering](#)]

Crete may be the biggest of the producers, but Santorini is the most important, thanks to its charismatic, long-lived wine from the assyrtiko grape. Santorini is located in the Cyclades group of islands, one of the windiest regions in Greece, and one of the driest. The only way for vines to succeed in these conditions is to basket train them close to the ground in nest-like structures. This protects them from the wind and harsh sunlight, while preserving moisture. The dreaded vine disease phylloxera has never invaded the majority of the islands—it cannot infect the infertile topsoil—so this region has the oldest vines in all of Greece, with 300-400 year-old roots.

Santorini is located on a dormant volcano. During its last eruption in 1500 B.C., it collapsed to form an inverted cone, covering the island in a deep layer of pumice and ash. The roots must dig really deep to get through to organic matter underneath.

Winemakers say that stressed vines make interesting wines, and the incredible complexity and lip-smacking deliciousness of Santorini's are proof of this axiom.

Assyrtiko is the grape they are woven from: a noble white capable of dynamic, age-worthy, intriguing wines. It has a unique ability to retain its acidity even in the island heat. The grape does not fall into the aromatic category like moschofilero, but struts its stuff with muscle, tannins, gorgeous salinity, and the ability to age like a riesling. The recent release from Domaine Sigalas (**\$25**) is intense and rich but steely, minerally, racy. Paris Sigalas started out as a mathematician with a wine hobby, and now **Domaine Sigalas** is one of Greece's most successful wineries.

With 32 appellations, 120 regions, 300 native varieties, and over 1000 wineries, Greece has a lot to bring to the table, but its biggest asset is its winemakers. Ted Diamantis of Chicago's **Diamond Importers** is a top importer of Greek wines and has spent years as its biggest evangelist: "The winemakers aren't doing it for the money, they're doing it for the passion. The average income in Greece is 10,000 euros a year. No one's getting wealthy making wine; they do it for love. They're keeping the tradition alive that's been around for thousands of years. Greece can never be a high-quantity producer, it's too mountainous to mechanize. Greece doesn't have an infrastructure, all products like bottles and barrels are imported in, paper for labels, capsules, cork, etc. But Greece can overdeliver in quality. It has the greatest story to tell." After millennia of winemaking, Greece is finding itself in a moment of reinvention, and there's no doubt that its future is going to be epic.