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## Greek winemakers eye vast Chinese markets, but limited production exposes weaknesses

By Tania Georgiopoulou

Chinese journalist and wine specialist Jade Li appeared surprised to hear that the yield of the Mylonas Winery near Keratea in eastern Attica stood at 400 kilos of wine grapes per 1,000 square meters and that the estate's vines covered an area of just 12 hectares.

Yet by Greek standards the Mylonas vineyard is comparatively large, given that fewer than 100 local wine producers have more than 100 acres to work with. In practice, the average Greek vineyard is no bigger than 5 acres.

“Which Greek grape varieties do you produce?” the Chinese journalist continued as she examined a bottle carrying the Cabernet label. “We have plenty of French wines in China, so we are not interested in Greek wines made of French grape varieties. We are now looking for new flavors and we'd like wines from the Mediterranean region. The Chinese enjoy fruity wines.”

Li was one of 15 Chinese journalists who visited Greece recently. The members of the group were hosted by a local interprofessional wine organization as part of a program to promote Greek wine abroad in collaboration with the Hellenic Foreign Trade Board, HEPO.

The group also visited Naoussa in northern Greece, where they tasted the Xinomavro grape variety, as well as the Peloponnese area of Nemea, where they sampled the Agiorgitiko variety. The winetasting sessions were complemented by visits to archaeological sites, given that for many foreigners Greece represents ancient culture and civilization, which would also explain why wine bottle labels featuring ancient Greek references immediately caught their attention.

As the Chinese wine specialists sampled wines produced in central Greece at the InterContinental Athenaeum Hotel in Athens, they seemed well informed and asked detailed questions regarding the locations and conditions of wine production.

Li seemed enthusiastic regarding wines produced in Naoussa.

“I have tasted Greek wines in China but they were low-budget wines. During this trip we tried some very good wines. What is difficult to remember are the names of the varieties; it's particularly difficult for us,” she said with a smile.

At a nearby table, Corinne Mui, who was tasting a Domaine Karadimos Assyrtiko, seemed genuinely surprised.

“This is very interesting. I had the impression that Assyrtiko was exclusively produced on Santorini,” said Mui, who trains Chinese sommeliers working in upmarket restaurants and hotels and has visited a number of Greek vineyards in the past.

Acting as interpreter for the group was Greek-Chinese Taian Liu. Though not a wine expert to begin with, Liu picked up speed during the trip. She noted that the Chinese guests were smitten with the Greek family wineries and the warm attitude of local wine producers.

“They had visited places in Spain where the vineyards seemed never-ending. The Spaniards and the French wanted to promote their wines, but in Greece small producers spoke passionately about their work,” she said.

Nevertheless, in the end, this advantage seemed to turn into a disadvantage.

“China is a good market but the country is vast and the Chinese want large quantities at low prices. We can offer neither,” said a representative of the Avantis Estate, a winery on Evia that already exports to China.

Despite the various efforts made so far, however, Greek wine exports to China remain limited. Last year, for instance, the turnover of wine exports to China did not exceed 1 million euros, while total turnover for Greek wine exports reached about 60 million euros.

Given that the overall turnover for Greek wine reaches about 400 million euros per annum, the conclusion is that despite the ongoing crisis, 85 percent of wine produced in Greece is consumed locally.

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