

[« Back to News & Features](#)

 7  

On the Savatiano Trail

by Tara Q. Thomas • posted on September 2, 2014
TQThomas

DON'T MISS STORIES. FOLLOW WINE & SPIRITS

  

Greece's Best-Kept Secret

For many people, the bottle that pulls them into the wine world is one that's profound and exalted. Mine wasn't even in a bottle. It was a Greek white taken from a barrel in someone's garage. He was the uncle of the guy who'd hired me to cook a luau at his weekend place just outside of Athens, and his vineyards were just down the slope from where we were standing, on a sunny cliff in view of the sea.

At the time, as a cook based in Athens, I knew far more about food than wine, and the wine's cloudy yellow hue was a little alarming. But it tasted like the sun, golden in its apple flavor and gentle in texture, with a freshness that echoed the wind blowing off the sea. I've pretty much spent the last 20 years searching for that wine, never to find it.

Until this spring.

Flying into Athens, it's hard to believe that there's a major wine region just 30 minutes from the airport: The city, a massive jumble of buildings that sprawls for miles, pushes up into the horseshoe of mountains that hems it in from the north, and crowds the seacoast to the south. Yet if you head east, over the mountains and away from downtown, Athens quickly becomes a distant memory. Here the craggy hills are blanketed with a mix of fatleaved fig and pale pistachio trees, gnarly old bush vines and fragrant desert scrub, and the sun beams down in a climate nearly as sunny and dry as Santorini's.

This is rural Attica, the southeasternmost point of mainland Greece, a spit of land framed by the Saronic Gulf to the west and the Aegean Sea to the east. Keeping it rural has, in fact, been a challenge for the locals. "With so many people in Athens now, they like to get out of the city on weekends," Stamatis Mylonas tells me when I arrive at his winery in Keratea. "At one point there were so many weekend houses going up that the government tried to stem the building with stricter construction permitting—but that didn't work, so they just all-out banned construction outside of urban areas."

Mylonas's 30 acres of vines are spread among 15 sites, some 45 minutes apart. He started bottling wine in 2006, a first for his family since they started growing grapes in 1917, and finished his winery in 2010.

As in most places, farmers traditionally sold their grapes to bigger firms that had the capacity for making and bottling wine. Most Greek regions, however, have been quicker in the postwar years to sprout a community of independent wineries. Not Attica. As part of what the Greeks call Central Greece (Sterea Ellada), which essentially encompasses the southeastern mainland up to the border with Thessaly, as well as the large island of Evia, the region has functioned as the engine for Greece's once-robust bulk wine market until only recently. In Greece's mountainous landscape, it was uniquely suited to the task, providing a relatively flat, fertile area with easy access to Athens and major shipping ports. Plus, after phylloxera hit, the government encouraged grape growers to plant savatiano, the heartiest of the local varieties. "Savatiano grapes are big—on a branch you'll get up to a kilo of them. It's got thick skins, it's very resistant to all well-known diseases," Mylonas explains. It didn't take long for savatiano to become the most widely planted variety in all of Greece, most of it concentrated in Attica.



When savatiano is grown at lower yields and picked earlier than tradition dictates, Mylonas thinks it can make something great. “It’s main problem is acidity: It starts high but drops quickly,” he says. He’s been experimenting with blending it with the high-acid assyrtiko in a wine he calls Apopsí (“viewpoint”); he’s also working with sundrying the grapes for a sweet wine he ferments in an amphora he inherited from his grandfather. He’s even got a sparkling savatiano in the works.

While Attica’s soils are varied, Stamatis Mylonas favors the limestone-rich ones. “On limestone, we get better acidity, crunchier fruit,” he says.

While the locals in Attica are quick to rave about their figs and pistachios—both of which claim PDOs (Protected Designations of Origin)—as well as the seafood served up

in the local seaside tavernas, savatiano doesn’t get much respect. “People equate it with retsina,” says Petros Kneknopoulos, referring to the pine resin-scented wine that flooded the market in the 1970s. He’s the enologist at Katogi-Strofilia, one of the first wineries in the area to make unresinated wines with savatiano after the retsina boom.

“This area developed differently than other wine regions,” he explains as we head toward the port town of Anavyssos for a late lunch. “In other places, people would have planted grapes up on the hill, where the soil is poorer, because the grapes can take it; they would have left the richer soil for grains and greens. Here, the people planted for production, not for themselves.” The goal was quantity, not quality.

“Traditionally, people harvested in mid-September, when the grapes were turning brown,” Kneknopoulos says. “Then they’d add resin and sell the wine to a shipper, who’d water it down and ship it over to Pireaus, where it’d be sold to tavern owners who’d again water it down and then sell it to their customers.” The pine resin that vintners once added for a pleasant cooling effect (“droserótita”) became instead a cover-up for a multitude of sins, destroying the reputation of retsina along with savatiano itself.

“When Giannis Maltezos started Strofilia winery, he was a civil engineer—this was more a hobby,” says Kneknopoulos. Maltezos set out to revive the vineyards his grandparents had planted here after they immigrated from Turkey. “He studied winemaking and got together a few friends, and they tried to do something different. You

can see from the photos,” Kneknopoulos says, waving at the black-and-white photos of long-haired hippies plastering the tasting room wall, “that it was a fun thing for him.”

Maltezos started harvesting earlier, Kneknopoulos explains, and using temperature control and sulfur to keep the freshness in the grapes. To address savatiano’s low acidity, he added ugni blanc. “Ugni blanc and savatiano—that was Strofilia, a white wine.” It became a household name, popularized via Strofilia, the wine bar they opened in 1985 in Athens, a first for the city, and a wildly hot scene for many years.

But no one talked about what went into it; the wine was simply Strofilia. And Strofilia never stressed the savatiano component, either. “We’ve never actually bottled a one-hundred-percent savatiano,” Kneknopoulos says, introducing the first such wine, which they will release next year after five experimental vintages. He pulls a taste of the 2013 from an old barrel, where it’s been resting on the lees. It’s a completely different wine than the bright, light Strofilia white, with a broad texture and golden apple flavor—a stately, quietly opulent savatiano.

While Maltezos was experimenting with savatiano, Vassilis Papagiannakos was working alongside his father at the winery his grandfather founded in 1919. Based in Markopoulo, directly east of Athens, savatiano was their bread and butter. “That neoclassical house across the street?” he says, when I meet him at the winery. “That’s the one I grew up in. My favorite memory is hearing my dad get up and go into the kitchen to prepare carrots to give to the horse—of lying in bed, still sleepy but knowing what time it was, listening to the roosters crowing outside, and knowing that Dad was heading to the vineyards.”

Papagiannakos went off to work at Achaia Clauss, a large winery in the Peloponnese, while back in Markopoulo, the vineyards were disappearing under urban sprawl. “When I was a kid, all the grape growers were saying that we make the best wine in the world. My father told me that savatiano is a great variety and we have great terroir.” The reputation outside of the region was not so positive; people had no respect for the grape at all. “But then once, Ms.



When I was a kid, all the grape growers were saying that we make the best wine in the world. My father told me that savatiano is a great variety and we have great terroir.

— Vassilis Papagiannakos

Kourakou came to the winery,” Papagiannakos recalls, referring to the former head of the country’s Wine Institute and president of the OIV (Organization of Vine and Wine). “I heard her say that Greece couldn’t make any great white wines—except for Cava Cambas. And I thought, ‘OK, good then,’ because Cava Cambas is savatiano.”

Eventually, he says, “I just didn’t want to hear anybody say savatiano is bad anymore. It was like assyrtiko was in 1983 or ’84—vinified with no refrigeration; it was often awful. But it didn’t have to be like that. In 1995, when I worked at the co-op, the enologist vinified savatiano at 19°C—used cold water poured over the top of the tank, running down the sides. The wine was great; we used it for our daughter’s graduation. I felt I should prove this, that savatiano can be very good.”

So Papagiannakos went home and built a state-of-the-art winery across the street from the house he grew up in. The airy structure is one of the most modern-looking wineries in all of Greece, flooded with natural light and air and fed by an underground river they discovered during construction. Stone walls and warm wood plank floors contrast with the rows of stainless steel tanks, a museum-quality environment in which to show off the local savatiano.

We sit at a long wooden tasting table in a shady cove of the winery and Papagiannakos begins pulling corks on bottles. His young savatianos have caused waves all over Greece for their fruitiness and clarity—characteristics not often associated with the variety. “It is a neutral grape,” Papagiannakos says, “which is why it’s perfect for retsina; it takes up the flavor really well. But with modern vinification, it can have aroma—not like sauvignon blanc in aromatics, but enough.”

When I ask how much cultured yeast has to do with the fruity aromas, he shakes his head vigorously. “We harvest early, at 3.25 to 3.30 pH, the acidity five to seven degrees on average; classic white vinification, but quickly, at low temperatures,” he says, running down what he considers to be the essentials in vinifying good savatiano. “We use only neutral yeast,” he says, explaining that he relies on a *pie de cuve* he makes from the must, plus a *Saccharomyces bayanus* strain he’s chosen for its neutrality.

And those fruity aromas are fleeting. They’re present in the 2013, bottled just a couple months earlier, the grape’s typical apple tones skating into guava territory. By the time we get to the 2011, the tropical tones have disappeared, the wine maturing into a quieter, more elegant richness of apple and fresh almond notes. The 2009 is complex, with herbal and mineral notes showing through the almond flavors.

Then he pulls out a 2008 Ktima Savatiano—a single-vineyard estate (ktima) bottling. It’s as addictive as Marcona almonds, saline and oily, rich and smoky, with still-vibrant acidity. “I stopped making this because I couldn’t support two savatianos, both stainless,” he

says, shrugging. He found that the Ktima bottling, with 12 hours of skin contact at eight degrees Celsius, required too much work considering the prices savatiano can fetch. Instead, he bottles just one savatiano now, which sells for about \$16 in the US, and a resinated version for \$14.

Bolstered by the good showing, Papagiannakos pulls out a 1998, his first vintage. “I found it this morning in our old house—definitely not perfect conditions!” he says as he pulls the cork. The wine is a rich, golden color and smells of petrol, like old assyrtiko. Caramel flavors gild the fresh almond notes, the acidity mild yet still vibrant. “This was made the old way—old tanks in open air, with cooling jackets,” he says, clearly delighted. “I knew it was a good grape.”

“We get 320 days of sunshine here, and no rain May through October. We treat with sulfur in May, and that’s it; we irrigate only the trellised vines, as the bush vines are well adjusted. It’s no wonder all the ancient philosophers gathered in this area; it’s fantastic.”

—Vassilis Papagiannakos

Heading back toward the airport, I stop in to see Roxane Matsa. Although she’s better known today for popularizing malagousia, her family’s estate was built on savatiano; this was, in fact, the very source of Cava Cambas, the one Papagiannakos pointed to as inspiration for his belief in the greatness of savatiano. After the Boutari company acquired Matsa Estate in 1991, Matsa continued to make one of Greece’s best savatianos until 2003, when she decided to graft the vines over to other varieties. The Boutari Matsa Estate white is now 100 percent malagousia. “We did try so hard—catastrophically—for many years,” she says, referring to savatiano. “It’s a terrific grape—the nicest of all the grapes in how good-looking it is, golden and firm, with thick skins,” she says. “Malagousia is greenish and it’s always wet—the skins break and it oozes. It’s a pain to grow well. If this were all savatiano,” she says, sweeping her arm around the vineyard, “I’d need only two workers.”

“But I wouldn’t have survived if I’d had only savatiano all these last twenty years. You can buy it for fifteen cents a kilo. All the other grapes cost about four times more. It’s no wonder people are abandoning it.” The locals, in fact, think she’s nuts for holding on to as much of her family estate as she has: When the Athens National Airport was being built in the 1990s, the government was offering her a fortune to turn her land into runways. There is still a lot of savatiano planted in Attica, she allows—about 10,000 acres—but it used to be more than double that.

She says this as she pours a 2011 she had aged in a six-year-old barrel from November until June, with battonage. “Savatiano does well in oak; the flavors merge well with the sweet fruit,” she says. The wine tastes like a slightly mature Rhône white, waxy, oily, nutty like pecans, with a succulence to the golden apple fruit. It’s beautiful wine. “But it doesn’t pay,” she says. “This is so much work



A 1964 Clos Matsa, even in less than pristine condition, makes a strong argument for savatiano's aging potential.

summer—fruity, round, easy, the citrus and green apple flavors fresh and clean. “We don’t do anything,” she says. “We pick until three in the afternoon, then put the grapes into a cold room. The next morning, we just take the stems off and press. I’ve done this for forty years. It’s a simple wine, the sort you can put some ice cubes into on a hot summer day.”

“This is the thing about savatiano: I used to pick at eleven degrees; you can also do thirteen degrees; it’s good any old way,” Matsa says. “People [here] don’t want to hear this, but it’s a very good variety for an everyday wine. Savatiano should be the pinot grigio of Europe,” she says, only half joking.

On the other hand, she opens a 1964 Cambas Estate wine labeled Clos Matsa Blanc—a 100 percent savatiano. While the crumbly cork shows that the bottle has seen better days, the wine is still alive, smoky and mineral.

and it doesn’t pay more than four euros. If I could make savatiano like this and sell it all, I’d rip everything out and plant savatiano again.”

The bottle I want to taste, though, is the one on top of her fridge—a plastic soda bottle labeled in black Sharpie. “Oh that? This is what I serve my friends when they come over.” She pulls a cold one from the fridge and pours me a slightly cloudy, golden glass. “It’s nothing special—it’s just wine, straight from the tank.”

This is it: This is the taste I’ve been hoping to find for 20 years. It tastes like



This is the thing about savatiano: I used to pick at eleven degrees; you can also do thirteen degrees; it’s good any old way.”
—Roxane Matsa

Back in Athens that night, I round the corner from my hotel to go to [Heteroclito](#), a tiny wine bar on a small block not far from Syntagma Square. Easter is coming, so people are beginning to relax, looking forward to a long holiday weekend, and the wine bar is jamming. People have spilled out into the street, where the staff puts out chairs and small tables as fast as they can haul them up from the basement. Upstairs, the lights burn brightly; it turns out there's a tasting of savatiano going on, put on by a guy who runs a biking club. He's planning to run some bike trips to local wineries—showcases like the Papagiannakos Winery as well as some of the smaller, newer places, like Mylonas. Judging from the number of people heading up the stairs, and the number of glasses being passed around downstairs, savatiano's secret is out. ■

This article first appeared in W&S, August 2014.

