

Articles on greek wines

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Producer of the Month: January, 2007

Domain Sigalas

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My preferred beverage of choice is white wine, starting with bubbly. I think this is the hardest category of wine to make great and I am very critical of all the soulless white plonk produced. But on my recent trip to Greece, I was blown away by an obscure white wine that fought all the odds. I was on day 8 of a 10 day march through the wine country of Greece with 8 other Master Sommeliers. We were tired, cranky and not looking forward to another 9 pm tasting that would be followed up by another long late dinner and early morning. There was no doubt the white wines that were to come were going to get pummeled... or so I thought.

Beginning with the first wine the magic could be felt. A hush came over the masters as we puzzled with the depth, texture and length of this wine. Tim Gaiser MS was the first to say early into the vertical tasting, "I don't want to spit these wines out," followed by fellow colleague Laura Williamson MS who was so enthralled with the way the wines were developing in the glass she refused to dump wines as the older vintages continued to flow. It was a magical moment as this wine permeated our soul and drew us into the glass.

It is a rare to have 8 Masters unite in agreement on how special a wine is, but that is exactly what this little gem did. Against all odds it won our hearts and minds. The winery is Domain Sigalas located on the volcanic Island of Santorini, and the wine was produced from a grape called Assyrtiko.

Santorini - The Island

The Island of Santorini is located in the middle of the Aegean Sea and is part of the Cyclades Islands. It is a magnificent expression of Mother Nature's power and beauty. As I sat in a café overlooking the caldera (volcano crater) while sipping on a glass of Ouzo it dawned on me that some 3500 years ago I would actually be overlooking the center core of a 10,000 foot volcano; and that it's outer slopes would be filled with vineyards being cultivated by an advanced civilization during the Bronze Age. Tragically, this ancient civilization would later be wiped out in an instant as a gigantic explosion would blow the island apart leaving nothing but this sliver of land in the middle of the Aegean Sea. I have traveled to many beautiful places in the world, but this island tops the list. I can not describe the awesome grandeur of the island so I highly recommend everyone to come for the view and stay for the wine.

Domaine Sigalas

Pari Sigalas is a very unassuming and quiet man that opened his winery in 1991 as a hobby in his home. This hobby soon got out of hand and turned into a business so in 1998 he built the current winery in the village of Oia. Unlike many of the wineries that we visited in Greece with state of the art and grandiose wine making facilities, Sigalas has a more modest facility with exactly what he needs. No more, no less. It has a beautiful view that overlooks the Aegean Sea and has a comfortable and inviting feel that hides the seriousness of the wines that are produced inside.

After listening to Mr. Sigalas, it became quite apparent he is a traditionalist when it comes to winemaking and grape growing. He spent the majority of the time talking about his vineyards and showing us the dirt, the vine and the grapes. Although there is a fair amount of technology available to him in the winery, his discipline is the vine and he uses technology sparingly to bring out the identity of the land. This discipline could be plainly seen in the wines.

Soil and Climate

The soil consists of volcanic ash called tuff mixed with lava, magma and other volcanic elements along with schist and limestone. It looks like debris is spread everywhere as there are so many different colors mixed into the soil, but in reality it is a geologists dream. The regional name for the dirt is aspa and I have 4 different rocks from the vineyard sitting on my desk (call me a geek). The most interesting is the pumice rock which is very light and is essential to the vine's life as it stores water for the vine to tap into during the long, dry growing season.

The climate is very warm, sunny, and quite humid but nearly void of rain. In fact, it never rains during the growing season and it is unbelievable to me that a vine could grow here. To source water the vine must either find small reserves of water trapped in the volcanic pumice or absorb water from the evening fog. The other major problem the vine faces is the constant wind that can tear a vine apart. The wind may cause poor fruit set at flowering which will dramatically reduce yields and increase water stress by evaporating the water in the grape berries. Although this wind, called meltemia, can cause many problems it also brings benefits. First, it prevents fungus from growing and moderates the heat. As well, slow dehydration of the grapes dramatically increases the dry extract in the berries which accounts for the high density of weight the wines have without high levels of alcohol.

The Vineyards

All vines on Santorini are planted on their own root stocks as Phylloxera cannot survive in the deep volcanic sand. New vines are planted by layering. This is where a shoot while still attached to a vine is buried and left to set roots. Once the roots have taken, the vine is severed from the mother. At one time Santorini had about 4,000 hectares (about 10,000 acres) of vines, but between the cost of farming very difficult vineyards and the highly developed and much more profitable tourist industry, plantings have dwindled to roughly 1,200 ha. As you drive around the island you can see many abandoned terraced vineyards waiting for someone to come and bring them back to life before a developer swoops in to build vacation homes. Unfortunately, growing grapes on Santorini is only for the toughest and most passionate of farmers. The stress on the vine is so great most vineyards struggle to produce 40 hl/ha with the average being about 30 hl/ha -- that is 2.2 tons of grapes per acre; this is lower than most Grand Cru Burgundy harvests.

Take a walk into a vineyard and you quickly realize this isn't Napa Valley. I was shocked at the first vineyard I saw. There was nothing that resembled a vine; all I saw was what resembled a bunch of over grown weeds that looked like large bird nests. But upon a closer look these bird nests were actually vines. Each vine is trellised into a basket, called an ampelies, which lies right on the ground. Because there is virtually no rainfall weeds do not even grow here. This basket-trellised vine protects the fruit from the wind and helps the vine absorb moisture from the fog at night and the ground during the day.

Domaine Sigalas pioneered organic grape growing on Santorini and in 1994 converted all of their vineyards to organic practices. As well, Pari pays a premium for any purchased fruit as it too must be grown with organic

practices. They currently own 14 ha of Assyrtico grapes and have long term contracts for another 6 ha planted to Athiri, Mandilaria and Mavrotragano grapes with plans of planting or revitalizing another 15 ha of Assyrtiko in the near future. Current production is about 6500 cases.

The Grapes

Assyrtico (A seer' tee ko) - This grape makes up roughly 70% of the plantings on the Island. It produces a wine very reminiscent of Chablis with its steely edge, dense extracted mid-palate and overt minerality. It has a unique combination of high alcohol (13% - 13.5%) with excessively high acidity. Balance is achieved with the dehydration of the grapes which not only raises potential alcohol but also dry extract which gives this wine such an incredible texture.

Athiri (Ah thee' ree) - This is one of Greece's most ancient grapes. It is known for its production of sweet wines although it may be blended in small amounts into Assyrtico. The low acidity of Athiri can help round out the high acid edge of Assyrtico.

Mandilaria (Mahn dee lar ya') - This is the next most important grape on the island making up about 20% of the plantings. It is used in the production of dry rose, light dry reds and dessert wines made from sun-dried grapes. I got to taste some of these grapes that were drying on straw mats and they tasted like strawberry jam with a gripping tannic feeling.

Mavrotragano (Mav ro trahg anoh) - Thought to be extinct Pari Sigalas is pioneering the return of this grape. The first bottling was produced in the mid 1990's. It produces a dense deep red that is rich with tannins but has surprisingly restrained alcohol at 13%. The name translates into Black Crunchy which I would assume gets its name from the dark color and chewy tannin.

Domaine Sigalas Santorini AOC Vertical Tasting

Unfortunately tasting notes can never fully express the palate-blowing experience these wines provided. As I begin to review my notes I get excited all over again. These wines are all made from 100% Assyrtico which is cold macerated on the skins. The must is then clarified after which the fine sediment is added back in just prior to fermentation. The fermentation happens slowly at low temperatures. The notes are presented as they were entered into my PDA during the tasting. A few minor adjustments were made for clarity.

2005 Santorini AOC

Lemon citrus dominated wine with a nice fragrant floral character. Very high mineral component that is very reminiscent of Chablis, yet the density on the mid palate feels more like Meursault.

2004 Santorini AOC

Clementine, sweet citrus, honey, layered and complex! Could be the finest white wine I have tasted in Greece. The finish is really long and haunting. Still very tart, but the extra year has given greater breadth of aroma. It will be interesting to see how this wine progresses over time.

2003 Santorini AOC

WOW!!! Something isn't right. This wine is too freaking good! The depth of flavor is incredible! It is more smoky and the minerality is more toned down than the younger wines. Brown baking spice notes with lemon curd. It is somewhat reminiscent of good Hunter Valley Semillon blended with high quality grand cru Chablis.

2002 Santorini AOC

This is really quite unbelievable! The acid is still firm yet gives way to a more waxy Grüner Veltliner-like mouth feel. You can almost chew these wines the density is so rich, yet the wine doesn't feel cloying or over the top. It has the pretty crushed oyster shell element found in Grand Cru Chablis and a long elegant finish.

2001 Santorini AOC

How far is Sigalas going to take us back? Tim Gaiser MS just mentioned the wines are getting to good to spit. This wine has all the sweet citrus, honey, spice and fragrance of the previous wines, but it is now developing a silky roundness. The finish is unbelievable, filling my entire mouth and continuing on and on.

2000 Santorini AOC

We are in trouble now. Laura Williamson MS won't give up her glass because the wines are evolving so well and it appears Sigalas is going to take us back to even earlier vintages. This wine is beginning to show bottle bouquet (secondary note fruit aromas). There is a hint of oxidation but the fruit is still vibrant. The oxidative character is like a gun flint smoke and tobacco leaf which then gives way to sweet citrus fruit.

1998 Santorini AOC

This wine seems oxidative but not over the hill... With some air it is getting really exotic... not sure how to describe it. Keith Goldston MS has it - orange sherbet over Belgian waffles with marzipan and nougat... The fruit is dried pineapple and dried peach with a slight wooly character. At first I thought the wine was a bit tired, but it has evolved beautifully!

1997 Santorini AOC

Again the wine starts out somewhat oxidative and then bam the flavors just start unfolding. Oats and barley, pretzel dough, baked apple, candy lemon, brown spice, lavender, Chamomile tea.... Keith Goldston MS comments, "It smells like Whopper Malted Milk Balls." (I know it sounds strange, but it fits.) Freaking outstanding!

1996 Santorini AOC

I am getting tired... Cream, toasted hazelnuts and an odd rancio character, yet this wine has a distinctly oxidized nose... as the wine gets air the fruit on the palate becomes rich and vibrant... I have never seen wine come to life like this... A mineral-laden chalky finish with an anise and mocha edge followed by a roasted meat-like character....

1995 Santorini AOC

The minerality is very much lava rock with potpourri and mint. A juicy blend of candied lime, peach pit, unsweetened caramel, and peanut butter.... Or how about this: Chamomile tea spiked with a little Calvados served with peanut brittle and fruit cake... and a really long haunting finish.

1993 Santorini AOC

This was Mr. Sigalas' 3rd vintage made commercially. It has that marzipan hazelnut character but tons of dried fruit cake and chamomile tea. The acid is still prevalent but restrained. Lava rock, minerals, smoke... 13 years old! What a find this winery is! The wines will retail for less than \$20 US!

Domaine Sigalas Barrel Tasting

After all this we were still not finished! We then tried a vertical of barrel fermented Santorini. These wines

were barrel fermented and aged sur-lie 6-8 months in barrel - 25 % new to 4 year-old barrels. The barrels were French barrique that were lightly toasted. This oak thing scared me a bit but the results were stunning. Again the notes are presented as they were entered into my PDA during the tasting. A few minor adjustments were made for clarity.

2005 Santorini Barrel AOC

Wow! A wine with barrel notes that I actually enjoy?... Great use of oak, the barrels did not take away from the fruit but added a layer of complexity. The spice note is juiced up and the vanilla bean character is a nice addition to the flavor profile.

2004 Barrel - ditto - my thumbs are getting tired from typing and I don't want to like these wines.

2003 Barrel - ditto again

2001 Barrel - there has to be a bad wine somewhere around here!

2000 Barrel - I am really surprised. Someone won me over with their barrel fermented wine.

All winemakers should learn from this gentleman's use of oak. The wines were spectacular! These wines were like high quality Grand Cru Burgundy with a dash of Hunter Valley Semillon rounded out with Erstes Gewachs Riesling and should retail in the US around \$28.

Domaine Sigalas Mavrotragano

2004 Mavrotragano

The so-called Black Crunchy wines. From traditionally cultivated vineyards that are 50-80 yrs old. The wines are aged for 18 months in French oak barrels of which 85% are new. A deeply-colored wine, earthy, meaty, black peppery and Syrah-like with ripe blue and red fruit like Zinfandel, but the concentration and power of Amarone. There is a slight dry herb and chocolate mocha like character. The tannins are high, acid levels medium with a dense chocolate note. Available from the winery only... too bad.

Domaine Sigalas Dessert Wine Tasting

2003 Vinsanto

Made from 70% Assyrtiko and 30% Aidani - ALL FREE RUN JUICE! Aged 24 months in 5 year-old French oak barrique. The grapes are dried for 15 days before they are loaded into the press to allow the free run juice to drip off. There was a batch of Assyrtiko grapes draining in the winery that we tasted earlier. It was like syrup, very dense, and I can't wait to taste the wine.

WOW! This wine is freaking awesome!! Beautiful aromatics filled with potpourri, but the palate will just blow you away with its density, depth, length and balance. Unctuously sweet but with balanced acid and 10% alcohol; this wine will age impeccably well! The fruit is so exotically ripe and generous, with molasses, kumquat and mango chutney, dark chocolate with maple brown sugar... There is no possible way I will spit this wine out. This wine will retail at about \$65 US.

2003 Mezzo

This wine is made from 100% Mandelaria grapes that were sun dried for 10 days. The wine is aged in used barrique for one year. Strawberry juice, strawberry jam, and dark chocolate covered cherries spiked with

Cherry Herring. Medium plus on the tannin, with higher levels of acidity and an extracted and long finish. The wine will retail in the US at about \$35.

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