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Explore Greece's white wines for Orthodox Easter

By Bill Daley

Easter dawns for millions of Orthodox Christians on Sunday and how appropriate it would be to celebrate the Pascha by pouring Greek wine at your holiday dinner. Even if you celebrated Easter last month, consider a Greek wine with your Sunday meal. A change of pace always does a soul good, especially that of a wine lover.

Greek whites today are much more than retsina, an aromatic wine laced with pine-tree resin that dates back some 3,000 years.

"They've got acidity, aroma, lots of minerals," said Sofia Perpera, an oenologist who is director of All About Greek Wine, an Atlanta marketing company working with Greek wineries. "Moschofilero is romantic with a great acidity. Assyrtiko has nice body and great acidity."

Today's wine industry has been pumped up over the last 40 years by new investment and new technology. Indigenous grape varietals with, for non-Greeks, tongue-twisting names like agiorgitiko (ah-yohr-YEE-tee-koh), moschofilero (mo-sko-FEE-leh-ro), xinomavro (zee-NOH-mah-vroh) and assyrtiko (ah-SYR-tih-koh) are grown along with more familiar international varietals like sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay.

Perpera said that most people new to the wine are particularly surprised by the whites. There's a lemony aspect to the whites that keys into the flavors of Greek foods, Perpera added.

That may explain why Alpana Singh is so taken with assyrtiko (also spelled assyrtico). This white could be Greece's answer to pinot grigio, albarino or even gruner veltliner, she says.

Singh is the wine and spirits director of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises restaurant group. She recently returned from a wine tour of Greece sponsored by Perpera's group.

"I would tell you if the wines were not very good," she said. "I was expecting good and what I got was outstanding."

After sampling some 250 Greek wines, Singh predicted that consumers will be "wowed" by them. The biggest challenge will be learning how to pronounce the grapes, she said.

The second biggest challenge, she said, is educating wine drinkers to all the variety of Greek wine. The word hasn't quite gotten out.

"I was almost angry because if I hadn't gone there I wouldn't have discovered all the varieties," Singh said. "That's like thinking of Italy only as pinot grigio."

Perpera said the Greek attitude toward wine is rooted in its culture. "Wine for Greeks is part of everyday life,"

she said. "The wines are meant to be served with food. These are not show-off wines, but you'll want a second bottle on the table."

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