



DIRECT PRESS

April, 2023



**THE RISE AND FALL AND RISE
OF GREEK WINE**

The origins of so much of our

wine culture come from Greece. From fermentation vessels to drinking cups, the sheer amount of distinct pottery from the era alone shows us how rich and complex a role wine played in the lives of the ancient Greeks. Wine was a huge part of religion and culture — they had Dionysos, an entire god dedicated to wine, after all — but wine also a tool for diplomacy with other countries and civilizations. The ancient Greeks spread their wine culture to the Egyptians, the Romans, the Celts, much of the Mediterranean, even up the Danube nearly to Austria, so it's a little surprising that Greek wine today does not have the central role one would expect given the outsize influence of the ancients. Much of what we associate with French wine culture is actually directly linked to ancient Greek wine culture, but these days many are introduced to Greek wine through cheap retsina, a wine made with added pine resin that can be distasteful enough to turn people off of Greek wine entirely. So what happened?

The Mycenaean Greeks were already importing and exporting wine around the Mediterranean by 1600 B.C.E., and this was the real catalyst for all the traditions and significance that formed around Greek wine. It was weirdly reassuring for me to discover mentions of wine merchants going back to 16th century B.C.E. Mycenae, as I don't typically think of my job as one of the most ancient professions. But it was this vibrant trading with other countries that allowed Greek

wine culture to flourish. The money made from producing wine for local consumption was only a fraction of the equation. So when the center of the wine trade moved from Athens to Rome in the 2nd century B.C.E., Greek wine was dealt a blow from which it never recovered. Yet by then many of the most recognizable hallmarks of today's wine culture had spread from Greece to the world beyond.

At the time of Homer's writing in the seventh century B.C.E., there was already a hierarchy of wines that were tied to specific places. He wrote specifically of Pramnian wine, a dark, high-alcohol wine that aged well and usually came from Ikaria, an island in the Aegean. Most of the top wines from this period were from the Aegean Islands of Chios, Lesbos, and Thassos, where a slate from the fifth century B.C.E. details some of the first wine laws. They were hardly less sophisticated than present-day wine laws. Wines from Thassos had to adhere to a specific style — rose petals were added to give them a unique floral profile — and amphorae from Thassos had to be in a certain shape and were sealed by regulators to guarantee their origin. It was forbidden to import wine onto the island to further protect the island's vinous integrity.

Adding rose petals, herbs, spices, and honey to wine was very typical for ancient Greek wine. These natural additives helped combat the spoiling effects of oxygen at a time when few other methods were available. They also covered up things like volatile acidity, or VA, as we often call it. (VA is the type of acid that tastes more like



Ornate *kraters*, like this one from the fifth century B.C.E., were used for mixing wine with water. The neck depicts the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs that started when the Centaurs got drunk on undiluted wine. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

vinegar or kombucha than wine, and it's as much an issue today as it was then.) Many wines were sweet or made from grapes dried in the sun, like Amarone, which also made them more stable. The addition that has most famously survived in Greek wine is pine resin, the defining feature of retsina. As most of you will find out with the Georgas Retsina featured this month (Press 4 Mix/White), retsina can be as tasty as it is unique; but it's not hard to imagine why people who've only had retsina made with poor quality grapes and excessive pine resin find it to be distasteful. Glass of Pine Sol, anyone?

Another notable difference in wine consumption was that the Greeks cut their wine with water in a 1:2 ratio, probably to the strength of most beer, 3-8% abv. A 50/50 dilution was viewed as scandalous. Undiluted wine was downright barbaric. This goes hand in hand with the growth of wine culture alongside another familiar concept: the aspirational lifestyle. In this case, it was the aspiration towards being civilized and resisting animalistic

impulses. Getting sloppy drunk? That was for barbarians, not cultured Greeks.

The myth of the Lapiths and the Centaurs, famously portrayed in one of the metopes on the Parthenon, is a cautionary tale about the dangers of not diluting wine. Long story short, the Lapiths invite the Centaurs to a wedding, the Centaurs get rip-roaring



Dimitris Georgas is restoring the reputation of retsina

drunk on undiluted wine, try to kidnap the bride, and begin to sexually assault guests. The Lapiths grab forks, knives, anything they can get their hands on, and a brawl turns into a battle that eventually drives the Centaurs out of Lapith land for good.

Something to keep in mind the next time you invite a Centaur over for dinner. To this day, Greeks use the word *krasi* — wine mixed with water — rather than *oenos* which is undiluted wine.

By the seventh century B.C.E. Hesiod was writing the first known literature on winemaking and oenology. In *Works and Days* he talks about storing wine in cold environments and the ways to prevent oxidation. The first to write entire volumes on wine exclusively was Theophrastus in the fourth century B.C.E., during the peak of Greek wine. He penned catchy titles such as *Concerning Odors*. In *Enquiry Into Plants* he is already discussing the effects of terroir and the complex interplay between soil, climate, and vines.

The Romans conquered Greece in 146 B.C.E., and within a very short period the center of the wine trade moved to Italy and southern France — this hasn't changed much in 2,000 years. Without an export market, the money stopped, and Greek wines plummeted in quality. Though quality rose a bit during the Byzantine era with monasteries taking over the best vineyards, the crucial export market never returned. Greece was under Ottoman rule from 1453 until 1821, and despite the primacy of Islam in the Ottoman Empire, they allowed the Greeks to continue making wine because of their long relationship with viticulture; but every aspect of wine was taxed heavily. In 1821, when the Greeks revolted to form the modern Greek state, most farming land was set on fire by the Ottoman Turks. Greece was getting a fresh start but their wine

would also have to start from zero.

The next 150 years were not much help to restarting a wine culture that had been largely stagnant for the previous 800 years. The young Greek state was extremely poor, and by the 1890s most of the wine being produced was badly oxidative. Pine resin helped with this, but the quality of the retsina at the time was nasty enough that most Greeks stuck to beer. Then phylloxera, an insect that wiped out 75% of Europe's vines starting in the 1870s, destroyed huge swaths of Greek vineyards starting in 1916. After that? The Balkan wars of 1912-1913, World War I, World War II, the Greek civil war of 1946-1949, and a right-wing military junta that ruled from 1967-1974.

Given these obstacles, Greek wine has come quite a long ways in the past 50 years — for comparison, that's about as long as the Finger Lakes has been an official wine region. In the 1970s, retsina became the face of Greek wine to tourists and to the American public visiting the many restaurants operated in the US by the Greek diaspora. Greek wine in the US was mostly imported by, and for, the diaspora, and was not found in fine-dining until the 1980s when the Greeks started getting into oaky Chardonnay and Syrah. This gave Americans an entry point while avoiding hard-to-pronounce grape varieties like Xinomavro and Agiorgitiko. Using international varieties and oak is still largely at play, but, as with many other countries, there has been a renewed focus for both winemakers and consumers on indigenous, ancient grape varieties. Natural wine is still not a big thing, but organic farming is

far easier than most places to adhere to in Greece's hot, dry climate and is being embraced more and more.

In New York, Greek wine is still struggling to get a foothold. Most of the exciting developments have been championed through the work of just a couple of importers, specifically DNS and Eklektikon. DNS was started by Dionysi Grevenitis, a seasoned wine veteran who is also Greek American. Rachel Stones, who has been with him since their start in 2012 (and was selling Greek wine for years before that) has taught me more about Greek wine than anyone since I met her back in 2015. DNS has a remarkable portfolio of growers like Tatsis (Press 4, Press 2), Zafeirakis (Press 4 Mix/White), Glinavos (Direct Press June 2021), and Hatzidakis (Direct Press June 2021, September 2022) that I have had the pleasure of working with for several years, with a few choice bottles stashed away in my collection to boot. Rachel is still introducing me to new growers like Iliana Malihin (Press 2) that have kept me enthralled with the enthusiasm that seems to be spreading among the younger generation in Greece. There are more and more people like Iliana who are eager to take over abandoned old vines and bring them — and Greece's wine culture — back to life.

Though we found ten truly remarkable and delicious wines for this month's wine club, finding wines like this out in the world is not easy; hopefully this will continue to change, too. Part of the challenge is that the entire country of Greece still produces less wine than the Bordeaux region of France, but, as mentioned before, it's mostly that Greece's domestic wine drinkers

cannot restore their former glory alone. They need our help. It requires a dynamic relationship between curious wine drinkers who have disposable income and winemakers who have the socioeconomic stability to invest in and court an international market. Finally, it seems, Greece can be the beneficiary of such a setup.

I have always believed that wine is more than a social lubricant, it is a gift from the earth that helps bring people closer together. It has been at the heart of agrarian society from the start, and some archeological research suggests that fermented foods and drinks were what made agrarian societies possible. Staying put and farming is a lot more appealing when you can party with your neighbors and drink wine while you feast on the spoils of your agricultural labors. The Greeks took this to quite an extreme in the form of Dionysian rites and all that, but reading about their history you can also see wine as a bellwether for assessing the health and vigor of the Greek people. The heights of civilization and the peak of wine culture coincide fairly neatly, which is not a surprise exactly, but it does suggest that the time we put into indulging our love of wine is perhaps time spent tending to the heart of civilization itself. Greece has, tenuously at points, held onto its wine culture through some of the lowest moments of civilization, and that is heartening; but it's even more so to imagine what could be in store if the rest of the world starts celebrating Greece's best wines once again.

Stin iyia sas!
Jonathan Kemp



This month's featured winemakers come from all over Greece, but they are almost all farming on mountainous, rocky, terrains with poor soils and very little rainfall.

Georgas Family 'Black Label' Retsina 2020

Attica • Greece
Press 4 Mix/White

Ah, retsina, the notorious pine-resin wine that has been many peoples' first encounter with Greek wine. Until recently, its reputation has been sullied because of industrial methods to make it as cheaply as possible. The grape used for most retsina is Savatiano, which is the most-planted grape in Greece. It turns out, though, if Savatiano is farmed at more moderate yields and pine resin is added in a more subtle way, retsina can be interesting, even deliciously refreshing. This version from the Georgas Family is just that.

Georgas is located in Attica, not far from Athens, where most retsina is produced. This Black Label retsina has 10 days of skin contact and zero sulfur additions. The pine is noticeable but it's very fresh, recalling a meadow or a rainy Pacific Northwest afternoon rather than, um, floor cleaner. Lifted and energetic, it's got some subtle honeysuckle, cedar, and pilsener notes. Make like a Greek fisherman and down this after a day out at sea with some fried seafood and a squeeze of lemon. *Jonathan Kemp*

Zafeirakis Assyrtiko 2022
Tyrnavos • Greece
Press 4 Mix/White

It's safe to say Christos Zafeirakis takes a more refined angle into his work, and this is a really good thing. Both winery and vineyards are impeccably set up, with a strong focus on organic viticulture featuring local varieties. The winery was built in 2005, in the region of Tyrnavos (the southern foothills of Mount Olympus), and it was here where his



*Panagiotis Dimitropoulos stirs
Biodynamic 501 Prep*

family has been involved in grape growing and wine-making for over a century. This cultural bond has definitely set the tone for the winery's program,

with strong focus on Greek varieties, but also exploring possibilities with grapes like Chardonnay and Syrah — echoes of his training in Europe.

The area's soils are a flinty, sandy clay, with good water retention promoting early ripening with high acidity — perfect conditions for varieties that thrive in a cleaner, more focused style like Assyrtiko.

There is a ton of crisp and perfectly

fine, “Two Dimensional” wine made with Assyrtiko out there, but Zafeirakis’ take carries a little more nuance: meyer lemon custard, and a fresh suggestion of hops. The wine is light and precise with white peach, spearmint, and a sizzle of crisp acidity cleaning up the finish. This clarity and texture reminded me of the alpine wines from northeastern Italy. Certified organic and Biodynamic.

Bruno Sant’Anna

Domaine Tatsis
‘Young Vines’ 2017
Kilkis • Macedonia
• Greece

Press 4 Mix/Red

This is a great example of the soul-satisfying wines being made by Periklis and Stergios Tatsis. 50% Xinomavro and 50% Negoska, made from younger vines in Macedonia; the older vines in this plot go into the Tatsis “Goumenissa” that is also featured this month. Xinomavro, with it’s edgy sour cherry notes, has a resemblance to Nebbiolo, while Negoska’s lower acidity and darker, earthy, tones are a perfect complement. Lots of crunchy herbal notes here: rosemary, violet, cranberry, and sarsaparilla, with a nervy backbone of grip and earth. Plenty of personality here but the funky flavors are reigned-in. The extra aging helps soften up and integrate the more gnarly ruggedness and add some complexity. This is an astounding wine for the money.

Tatsis was one of the first producers to doggedly stand behind Greek grape

varieties and older, natural winemaking techniques in Macedonia. When Periklis and Stagios Tatsis joined their father in the vineyards in the late 1990s, there were probably only four or five other winemakers who were working like they did. The Tatsis brothers really embody the idea that looking to the past is the way forward. They are working with organic and Biodynamic methods and zero sulfur.

Jonathan Kemp



Sant’Or
Agiorgitiko 2019
Peloponnese •
Greece

Press 4 Mix/Red

Sant’or is Panagiotis Dimitropoulos’ small family estate in the highlands of the Peloponnese, about 20 miles southwest of the city of Patras.

The property is in the small village of Santomeri (population 164), nestled on the northern end of Mount Skolli, a north/south mountain surrounded by an amphitheater-like network of hills. Panagiotis farms a little over 10 acres in this pretty unique terroir, with grape varieties there such as Agioritiko, Roditis, Mavrodaphne and the hyperlocal Santameriana, all following Biodynamic principles. In fact, this estate was the first to receive Demeter certification in Greece. Panayiotis left behind a career as an engineer to take over the family business and realize his dream of producing natural wine and organic olive oil. All of his wines come from spontaneous fermentations on wild

yeasts, and he's experimenting using reclaimed amphorae (refurbished at the winery using the local clay). The result is bright, luminous wines.

Agiorgitiko is seen in vineyards throughout Greece and it is the calling card. Using the structured wines of Nemea as reference, you'll notice that Sant'Or's Agiorgitiko feels more accessible, with mild tannins that are present yet not overpowering. It's a super friendly wine that reads a bit like a Piedmontese red: wild red/black fruit, dried flowers and spice. Lean, tangy, bright notes compete with dark, sage, pine and black cherry to make a wine with tension, clarity, and energy. *Bruno Sant'Anna*

Vaimaki 'Popolka' Red 2019
Amydeo • Macedonia • Greece

Press 4 Red

Amydeo is a name you may not have heard of before, but it is one of Greece's most important wine

regions. The appellation sits on the northwestern corner of the Macedonia region, and its continental climate and sandy soils are the perfect home for the Xinomavro variety, by far the most planted variety here. Amydeo's four lakes — Vegoritis, Petres, Cheimaditis and Zazari — also play a crucial role in tempering the region's climate, allowing for a fascinating range of styles from light and mouthwatering to more structured and nuanced reds.

We've featured wines from the Vaimakis family in past wine clubs, and Vasilis Vaimakis is without a doubt one of the references when it comes to fermenting wines naturally and zero sulfur vinification. His long experience in large scale wine making adds a lot of perspective to this more artisanal approach, and today, he and his wife Ekaterini continue to carry on the family's tradition. The couple is also known for making award winning vinegar "elixirs", infused with herbs and



Meli Ligas and some of her young Xinomavro vines

PHOTO: DOMAINE LIGAS

spices, used for finishing or served on ice as an aperitif.

“Popolka” is the local name for Xinomavro, and the fruit for this wine is sourced from cool vineyards around lake Vegoritis, the largest in the region.

Ferments and rests for 5 months in stainless steel, then spends 12 months in neutral oak barrique. Medium light with a with sappy, sour cherry fruit leather, sarsaparilla, coriander, anise... I could keep going but you should look up the 23 Dr. Pepper ingredients... it totally checks! Serve with a light chill. *Bruno Sant’Anna*

Ligas Moschomavro 2020
Pella • Macedonia • Greece
Press 4 Red

Pella, in central Macedonia, is a very fertile landscape, unlike the rocky, poor soils that most Greek winemakers contend with. Wine has long been a part of this region, dating back to the 4th century BCE.

Euripedes’ most well-regarded tragic play *The Bacchae* was even written and set here in 405 BCE, and deals with Dionysos and his followers.

Thomas Ligas, who started the estate in 1985, was of a generation of Greek winemakers who learned their trade in France, as there were no oenology degrees in Greece at the time. Though he began with larger

cooperatives and more modern winemaking, he devoted his own project to natural farming and permaculture from the beginning. Today, Ligas is run mostly by Thomas’ daughter Meli, and Ligas is one of the most visible standard-



Vasilis Vaimakis making vinegar

bearers for the natural wine movement in Greece.

This wine is 100% Moschomavro, a Macedonian grape that is aromatic and makes for lighter, fresher wines. Ligas’ version is made with more of an infusion approach than extraction, and zero sulfur additions, with fermentation and aging in older oak. It’s a little wild but it’s extremely tasty, with notes of hibiscus and dried apple rings. Great with a little chill.

Jonathan Kemp

Doric Wine White 2021
Delphi • Greece
Press 4 White

Giorgos Balatsouras has been farming and vinifying rare local

grapes, with organic certification, since 1998. He inherited his vineyards from his family in the village of Koniakos about 300 km or 190 miles northwest of Athens, near the ancient site of Delphi and Lake Mornou.

Giorgos started making wines in his family's traditional style to preserve the traditions of Greek villages that have been disappearing over time.

The village and vineyard are located in a fir forest at an altitude of around 800 meters, and is an alpine and pristine environment.

Giorgos' passion even drove him to single-handedly save the local red grape variety Kosmas aka Gousmadia from extinction by having Greek authorities recognize it officially.

This Doric White Wine by Giorgos is definitely a

mountain wine as indicated by the presence of local fir trees on the palate and nose as they use the fir branches to help maintain the cap of the fermenting destemmed hand selected grapes for 6 days in open wood fermenters. There's no climate control here and no additives, sticking with the rural and traditional practices of Balatsouras' family. The wine is made

up of the traditional Roditis variety and a small amount of Malagousia is added as a blending grape. The fir resin also supports an almost unsulfured bottling.

This is a truly natural wine on the palate giving off first an impression of the freshness and slight pithiness of fresh squeezed orange juice and marmalade. The fir trees are reflected in the aroma as well but just sneaking



Giorgos Balatsouras and family

in under the fruit and refreshing alpine minerality. On the palate this is an energetic and lively wine. Fresh citrus is lifted and bolstered by the fir, zippy acidity, and a saline finish with just enough tannic grip to stand up to light fare. *Jeremy Hernandez*

Kontozisis 'Sun White'
Malagousia 2021
Thessaly • Greece
Press 4 White

Kontozisis Organic Vineyards is an organic grower in Karditsa, a rural town in the region of Thessaly about 300 km or 190 miles north of Athens. Karditsa is known as the bicycle capital of Greece, and the homeland of the impressive Limniona red grape. The winery and vineyards are on the foothills of mount Agrafa, in two distinctive terroirs between Kanalia and Dafnospilia. Kontozisis has been practicing certified organic agriculture and organic vinification since 1991, one of the first to get such a certification in Greece. His long term commitment to organic practices shows his honest approach to sustainability.

Andreas Kontozisis and his partner Aphrodite Tousia are working passionately with the area's indigenous red grape, Limniona, among others, for which they have developed proprietary vineyard techniques to get as much concentration as possible from the variety's large grapes. All grapes are hand harvested and pruned from the low-yield (28 hectoliters / ha) estate-owned vineyards of 11 ha. Kontozisis uses no press (only free run wines) and no commercial yeasts.

Kontozisis Sun White wine showcases the indigenous Malagousia Grape. These vines are a relatively youthful 22 years old. The wine is pre-fermented with cold extraction around 47 degrees for 22 hours, then extraction with no pressing and only

free run juice is then fermented in concrete with indigenous yeast for 20 days. The wine is then allowed to rest in concrete for 2 months and is bottled with minimal sulfite additions.

This elegant white wine showcases aromas of white flowers, sea spray, green grapefruit, pomelo, and gooseberry. The palate is reminiscent of a delicious sauvignon blanc with distinct mediterranean influences. Initially I was met with pomelo, under ripe citrus lychee, cantaloupe, and finished with a bit of savory olive oil brine and a hint of dirty martini.

Jeremy Hernandez

Iliana Malihin Old Vines
Amygdalos Vidiano 2021
Rethymno • Crete • Greece
Press 2

Iliana Malihin studied enology in Athens with focus on researching Vidiano, the native white-wine grape of her home island of Crete. She's now one of the driving forces in an agricultural revival movement, working hand in hand with other Cretan viticulturists to preserve the area's own rooted, pre-phyloxera vines (some over 150 years old) and of turning out some of the most compelling wines we tasted for this month's club. In 2019, she set up her winery in Rethymno, a rugged, windy and high elevation area (well over 2000 feet in some spots), that was once home to around 170 acres of vineyards but has since shrunk to only about 30 acres. Iliana has access to nearly half of those remaining parcels, including those centenarian plots, and assists in farming everything organically. Working with ambient yeasts and stainless steel

tanks for cool fermentations, she's producing wines that feel as energetic and layered as the sun drenched terraces they come from. Her "Old Vines" Vidiano is leesy, textured yet electric, with a nose of ripe honeydew, preserved lemon, beeswax, fennel fronds and sea salt. The wine spends 12 months on its lees, giving it beautiful persistence and length. It's an impressive wine.

On a somber note, the wild fires of last August damaged a large part of the centenarian vineyards in this area, and it remains to be seen if they'll be able to recover. *Bruno Sant'Anna*

Domaine Tatsis
'Goumenissa'
Xinomavro
Negoska 2009
Kilkis • Macdonia
• Greece
Press 2

Periklis and Stergios Tatsis are behind some of our absolute favorite Greek wines. They have been outliers and rebels in the wine world since the 1990s when there were only three or four others in Greece doing the kind of natural farming and winemaking they had committed to. Organic from the start and Biodynamic since 2002, they are now making wines that are not only natural but ageworthy, complex,



Brothers Stergios (left) and Periklis Tatsis

and hauntingly beautiful.

Goumenissa, by law, must be a blend of Xinomavro and Negoska, and this is a 50/50 blend. It spends one year in barrel but then is held back until they

feel it's ready for release. It's not made in every vintage. The 2009 is the current release. It smells downright amazing: blueberry, cannabis, floral notes, sandalwood, and sage. There's a beautiful mixture of primary fruit and tertiary, earthy flavors. The feral, wild side of the wine has been tamed with time in bottle, but there's enough still there to keep things just a bit rowdy.

Overall it's in a fantastic spot right now so don't hold back on opening this, but it will certainly continue to age nicely. It's really hard to not compare this to old Nebbiolo, so keep that in mind for food pairings: wild boar sausage, black truffles, lamb chops, and hard cheeses are sure bets. This is a special wine, and the Tatsis brothers are nothing if not special characters in the current, changing world of Greek wine.

Jonathan Kemp



PHOTO: ALEXIS PERCIVAL

DIRECT PRESS

APRIL 2023

