

Opinion **FT Magazine**

Why Greek wines deserve more love

The only mystery is why these wines are not easier to find outside the country



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Every few months, the team at JancisRobinson.com organises a self-pour tasting for wine enthusiasts, designed to showcase a particular sort of wine that we think deserves more attention.

Our first event was in 2013, the first of four Barolo nights at a time when we thought British wine lovers were too focused on France. We wanted to expose them to the delights of a great wine that Americans appreciated so much more than we did.

Since then we've devoted tastings to [Brunello](#), [Chianti Classico](#), sherry, [Languedoc](#) wines, great dry [German Rieslings](#), Riesling Kabinetts and Cru Bourgeois [red Bordeaux](#).

Two Sundays ago, we held our most popular tasting to date — of [Greek wines](#). It sold out in a trice. Tasters queued in the rain for half an hour and one poor chap drove from Newcastle to London specially, only to arrive 15 minutes before the 9pm finish.

On the basis of the wines I tasted, selected by my fellow Master of Wine and colleague Julia

Harding, it is easy to see what all the fuss is about. The only mystery is why they are not easier to find on lists and shelves outside Greece.

Judging from our selection, Greek labels are smart and easy for anglophones to decipher. In the UK, however, it sometimes seems as though the trade is reluctant to get to grips with a whole new set of names, regions, appellations, producers and grapes.

Many appear content to leave this exciting field to a handful of specialists such as importers Eclectic, Novum and Southern Wine Roads, and retailers such as Bedales of Borough, Maltby & Greek, Quality Wines, Theatre of Wine, Vin Cognito, Whole Foods Market, Wine & Greene and the admirably catholic Wine Society — all of whom are more kindly disposed towards Greece than most.

The extremely varied landscape means that wines can be highly distinctive. The 42 choices included two retsinas designed to expunge memories of taverna horrors of old (one of which was my go-to wine after I'd tasted everything else), five (very) sweet wines, including a late-picked red that had been aged in barrel for 10 years, nine reds and 26 whites, two of them fashionably pale orange after prolonged contact with the grape skins.

Despite its latitude, Greece is best at white wines. Many come from vineyards at elevations so high that, were they in France, for example, it would be impossible to ripen grapes.

Vineyards of the Mantinia appellation in the central Peloponnese can easily be as high as 700m above the Aegean and enjoy nights cool enough to preserve the delicate perfume of the Moschofilero grape while retaining sufficient natural acidity to keep the resulting wine — only 12.5 per cent alcohol — refreshing. Many other Greek wines owe their refreshment factor to sea breezes.

All the wines in this tasting were made predominantly — and most of them exclusively — from indigenous grape varieties, 24 of them in total; only three were blended with an international variety. Some — red Mavrokountoura and Cretan white Melissaki — were new even to me, co-author of *Wine Grapes*, a once-definitive guide to all grape varieties known in commercially available wines.

Robola is the characteristically lime-scented white wine grape of Kefalonia — to be sipped with memories of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, perhaps. Chidiriotiko is thought to be unique to Lesbos, a reminder that there are other aspects to the island than its tragically overcrowded refugee camps.

Muscat and the more exotic Fokiano are specialities of the island of Samos, where they are dried in the hot summer sun to produce particularly sweet wines. Crete has become the source of a wealth of local, extremely distinctive grape varieties, with producers such as Douloufakis and Lyrarakis growing grapes such as Vidiano, Vilana, Plyto and Dafni in the mountains.

But Greece's prime wine island is still the spectacularly volcanic [Santorini](#), whose speciality is the

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incontrovertibly noble Assyrtiko, aided and abetted by the Aidini and Athiri grapes.

There were 10 examples in our tasting, and no wonder. Several were from the island's strange, low, basket-shaped vines, which are said to be 100 or even 200 years old.

There were examples of wines made as long ago as 2008 and 2010 still going very strong, some with oak and some without, some allowed to ferment naturally without added cultured yeast. All deserve a place in any curious white wine lover's cellar.

Greek reds have improved enormously and these days they are much less reliant on imported grape varieties and on the specious make-up of an oak overlay.

It is also becoming clearer which varieties are the real stars. Matt Thomson, a Kiwi who makes wine all over the world but whose heart has been in Barolo and Burgundy mainly, was heard to say at this tasting: "I think I've fallen in love with the Xinomavro grape."

It's true that the best Xinomavros now being made in the Náoussa appellation, in the hills of western Macedonia, have the same tension, lightness and graininess as a fine Barolo.

Agiorgitiko is the renowned red wine grape of the Peloponnese's most famous red wine region Nemea. It tends to produce fuller-bodied, arguably more obviously accessible reds.

The wines had been shipped from Greece by Sofia Perpera and George Athanas of the Greek Wine Bureau in New York, in co-operation with an official producers' organisation.

Perpera told me excitedly that funds had been approved to promote Greek wines in the UK, but she still didn't know what her budget would be. If the UK were to leave the EU, her budget would be swollen by funds set aside to promote EU wines outside the union. A thin silver lining?

Some Greek favourites

For what it's worth, I gave 29 of the 40 wines I tasted a score of 16.5 out of 20 (high for me), and these are the ones I scored 17 or higher.

WHITES

- Gerovassiliou Malagousia 2018 Epanomi, Macedonia
- Douloufakis, Dafnios 2016 Crete
- Oenops Vidiano 2017 Greece
- Gentilini, R Robola 2015 Kefalonia, Ionian Islands
- [Aoton, Savatiano 2017 Attiki, central Greece](#)
- Methymnaeos, Orange Chidiriotiko 2016 Lesbos, Aegean
- Argyros, Monsignori 2017 Santorini
- Karamolegos, Pyritis 2017 Santorini
- Volcanic Slopes Vineyards, Pure 2016 Santorini
- Hatzidakis, Skitali 2016 Santorini
- Sigalas, Santorini 2010 Santorini
- Boutari, Selladia 2008 Aegean Islands

REDS

- Dalamara, Paliokalias 2015 Náoussa, Macedonia
- Tsantali, Rapsani Grande Reserve 2010 Rapsani, Macedonia
- Alpha Estate, Omega Late Harvest Xinomavro 2007 Florina, Macedonia

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