

THE MAGNIFICENT vineyards of Kir Yianni Winery, specialists in Xinomavro. (Kir Yianni)



# A GREEK WELCOME



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

In a country with an ancient history of winemaking, there was a wine monopoly producing pretty ordinary wines for a century or more. Eventually, one winery became a catalyst in encouraging higher standards of winemaking. A small winery revolution followed and the larger wineries were motivated in turn to reinvent themselves. For many years this country suffered from the image of producing ethnic wines for expatriates. At the turn of the millennium, the country started finally to gain the recognition it deserved.

This could be a description of Israel. Carmel Mizrahi was the monopoly, the Golan Heights Winery the catalyst. The small winery revolution was led by wineries like Domaine du Castel. The large wineries reinvented themselves in the early 2000s. However, I was not referring to Israel. I am talking about Greece.

In Greece the large monopoly wineries – Achaia Klaus, Boutaris, Cambas, Khourtakis and Tsantalís – made wines where the price was more attractive than quality. Retsina, the wine flavored with pine resin that you tasted on holiday, came to define the image of Greek wine, but it did not leave a good impression. The wines were often oxidized and tasted of paint stripper. Any hint of fruit or flavor was totally masked.

Domaine Porto Carras was the first winery that brought quality wine to Greece, using the expertise of the influential consultant Emile Peynaud. In the '90s the changes took root. Small wineries sprung up in different regions. Local varieties were proudly explored and put up front. Then the large wineries reacted to the competition.

As the world contracts with more and more wines made from only six or seven global grape varieties, in a conformist international style, Greece is a rare gem. Though it is a country with a wine history longer than Europe and the New World, it is regarded as relatively new in the corridors of quality wine. With

over 300 indigenous varieties and enormous variety of climate and terroir, it is a country of boundless interest to the wine lover, especially for one who likes exploring. I think it is fair to say that Greece has a reputation for making better whites than reds, but the gaps are closing.

I have always had a personal love affair with Greek wines. My own Greek awakening came in the late 1990s with wines from wineries like Gerovassiliou, Gaia, Kir-Yianni and Skouras. When I talked enthusiastically about Greek wines in Israel in the past, people looked at me with blank looks. Today, at last, we have a fine range of Greek wines available on the Israeli market.

The main regions represented here are Santorini, the Eastern Peloponnese and Central and Western Macedonia. The Big Daddy of Greek varieties is the Assyrtiko, which reaches its zenith in the island of Santorini. Here the soils are volcanic and unforgiving, and there is a constant, brutal wind. As a result, the vines are trained or rather woven, into unique baskets (kouloura) that protect the grapes. The picturesque buildings decorated with blue and white, and white cliffs, make this the ultimate postcard venue.



THE VINES in Santorini are woven into a basket called a kouloura. (Argyros Estate)

Assyrtiko is versatile, producing steely, minerally dry white wines, oak-aged fatter wines or luscious dessert wines. The telltale aroma is citrus and honey, and the spine of the wine is a flinty acidity. The dessert wines are particularly seductive and delicious. Most famous is the Vinsanto, which reeks of honeyed aromas of ripe dates and figs. If there is only one Greek wine on the wine list, it will be an Assyrtiko from Santorini.

THE PELOPONNESE is where many of the more inexpensive wines are grown. However it does have its own specialities. The first is Agiorgitiko, also known as St. George, which is the famous red variety associated with Nemea. It produces wine with the soft plushness of a Merlot, with a few more spicy notes. It can make everything from light, fruity, quaffing reds, to deep complex, age-worthy wines.

Newly popular is the Moschofilero, which is a pink-skinned variety and produces charming white wines, with a fruity, even flowery aroma reminiscent of Muscat. It has the same fresh, floral, grapey aroma, but is light, with good acidity. It is a product primarily of the Mantinia region in the Eastern Peloponnese.

The northern area of Greece is Macedonia. This is the most developed wine region in Greece, which is kissing the Balkans. The area is rugged, mountainous and relatively cool. The two varieties represented in Israel are Xinomavro and Malagousia.

Xinomavro is the variety that dominates northern Greece, most famously in Naoussa. This variety has the temperament and qualities of Nebbiolo. The wines don't have great depth of color, but have an enticing and enchanting aroma. They can have notes of cherries and tar, with a leathery texture, accompanied by pronounced acidity and drying tannins. These are wines that can age magnificently. It is so refreshing to taste a variety that is more subdued, more savory and less up front than the usual fruit bombs. Malagousia is an example of an indigenous grape variety being saved, revived and re-cultivated. It was Evangelos Gerovassiliou who discovered and nurtured it. The



**GREEK VINTAGES (from left):** Argyros Assyrtiko, Alpha Malagouzia, Gaia Thalassitis, Kir Yianni Naoussa, Alpha SMX, Boutari Agiorgitiko, Kechris Tear Of The Pine.  
(Photos: Wineries mentioned)

wine has a peachy, apricot aroma, a round mouth feel and a good acidity.

Meet the wineries and wines now available in Israel. Argyros Estate is one of the finest from Santorini, maybe even the best. Founded in 1903 and still in the Argyros family, the winery is mainly known for its wonderful dessert wines. Its Vinsanto is magnificent and one of the world's great sweet wines. The Argyros Atlantis White 2019 (NIS 85) is a blend mainly made from Assyrtiko. It is good value, with tropical aromas, a touch of citrus and good acidity. It is refreshing and a great introduction to the whites of Santorini. Argyros Assyrtiko 2019 (NIS 145) is made from vineyards that are over 80 years old. It has a citrusy, lemony nose, with a slightly oily texture and a backbone of steel. The acidity runs through the core of the wine from the first sip until the long fulfilling finish.

Boutari Winery is one of those large wineries that represented Greece for more than 100 years. The winery was founded in 1879 by Yiannis Boutaris. It became most well known for its wines made from Naoussa in central Macedonia. I have seen a Boutari label from 1906 showing Hebrew on the label. This only reminds us of the size of the Jewish community in Saloniki in those days. Before the boutique-wineries boom in Greece, Boutari started going local by opening wineries in different regions. They were the pioneers in Santorini. Today, apart from Naoussa and Santorini, they also have wineries in Goumenissa, Attica, Mantinia and Crete. Boutari Moschofilero 2019 (NIS70) is aromatic, flowery and fruity with a crisp balancing acidity. A charming, easy-drinking wine. Boutari Agiorgitiko 2018 (NIS 70) is bright, fruity, approachable and drinkable.

ALPHA ESTATE IS from northwest Greece in one of the coolest wine regions in the country. In 1998,

winemaker Angelos Iatrides and viticulturist Makis Mavrides planted a vineyard in Amynteo in Western Macedonia, and with perfectionism and the pursuit of excellence built one of the most successful quality wineries of Greek wine today. They have an excellent Sauvignon Blanc, the best I have tasted from Greece. Other wines in Israel include: Alpha Estate Malagouzia (sic) 2019 (NIS 78). It is fragrant, aromatic with tropical fruit and flavorful. Alpha Estate SMX 2016 (NIS 145) is a blend of Syrah, Merlot and Xinomavro. It is a wine of depth, complexity, great length and is full of flavor. A beautiful wine.

Alpha, Argyros and Boutari are represented by wine importers Shaked, and these wines may be found in their Derech HaYayin chain of wine stores. There are other Greek wines here from the Gaia, Kir-Yianni and Kechris wineries, respectively imported by Adom Kehe, the first importer to bring Greek wines to Israel, IBBL and Hacarem.

Gaia is a joint venture between viticulturist Leon Karatsalos and winemaker Yiannis Paraskevopoulos. Their winery name means "mother Earth." They opened wineries in Santorini and at Koutsi, not far from Nemea in the Peloponnese. They have become flag-bearers for Greek wines in Santorini and from the Peloponnese. There is a link with Israel here. Paraskevopoulos became the valued wine consultant in the establishment of Maia Winery, the small winery exploring Mediterranean varieties that is owned by Tulip Winery. Gaia Thalassitis 2019 (NIS 139) is one of the standards from Santorini, with an almost saline, salty character. It is a totally unique and wonderful expression of Assyrtiko and Santorini.

Kir-Yianni was established by Yiannis Boutari, who left the family firm to establish his own small winery in the 1990s. The move symbolized the new quality vision and ambition of Greek wines. He is one of the

great figures of Greek wines, whose achievements transcended wine. He became the much admired mayor of Thessaloniki. Kir-Yianni is one of the finest producers of Xinomavro. The Kir-Yianni Naoussa 2017 (NIS 75) is an introduction to Xinomavro for Israelis. It is named after the place where this variety is most at home and it represents great value.

There are some wines that provide a window into how wines were made thousands of years ago. For instance, wines from sun-dried grapes (like the Cypriot Commandaria), "orange wine" (white wines made with their grape skins like a red wine) and wine made in amphorae (as the Georgians have done since the beginning of wine time). One such wine with ancient roots is Retsina. However, more recently, pioneer wineries make Retsina in a more modern style, with the pine resin in a supporting role like an added flavor (not unlike the use of oak in an aged wine).

One of the best wines pioneering the modern style is Kechris Tear of the Pine (NIS 135). The wine is uniquely interesting, fresh yet complex, flavorful and has great length. Konstantinos Lazarakis MW, Greece's first Master of Wine, describes the Tear of Pine tasted over a few vintages as "not top-quality Retsinas, but top-quality wines that happen to be Retsinas." It is definitely worth a try for the curious and for those doubting the ability of Retsina to change to fit in with modern times.

It is wonderful news to welcome these wines to Israel. Let's hope more will follow. So now you can not only holiday in Greece, but enjoy their wines back home. For many here, Greece is a whole new world of quality, variety and individuality. Yamas! ■

*The writer is a wine industry insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years. He is referred to as 'the English voice of Israeli wine.'* [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)



BARREL CELLAR of Alpha Estate, considered among the finest Greek wineries. (Alpha Estate)

(Right) ALPHA ESTATE: A beautiful and advanced winery producing award-winning wines. (Alpha Estate)

