



FIRST FAMILY OF GREEK WINE

THE BEAUTIFUL vineyard at Kir-Yianni. (Photos: Daphna Sternfeld)



STELIOS BOUTARIS, owner and CEO of Kir-Yianni, talks about the founders of the family winery, Boutari.

TOP: KIR-YIANNI'S barrel cellar.



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Seeing Hebrew on the label of a 1906 Greek wine produced by Yiannis Boutaris, piqued my interest. Then I heard how over 100 years later, the mayor of Thessaloniki, Greece's second largest city, wore a yellow star at his inauguration. The mayor happened to be another Yiannis Boutaris, the great grandson of the previous one. Boutaris is the grand family of Greek wine. Joining the dots sparked my curiosity.

There are many similarities between Greek and Israeli wine. Both countries have a long history of winemaking, with a golden age not in the "new" or "old" world of winemaking, but deep in the ancient world. In fact, the Hellenism and hedonism of the Ancient Greeks was the culture that contributed to the forging of the strictly kosher wine restrictions the Rabbis introduced, to safeguard Judaism and build a fortress around the religion.

In both Greece and Israel, a modern wine industry was revived in the 19th century, with names like Achaia Clauss, Boutari, Cambas, Khourtaki and later Tsantali, in Greece, and Carmel in Israel dominating. These large monopoly-sized wineries ran the roost for over 100 years. They were not known for quality, but they established a modern wine industry and kept it going. They gave farmers a reason to plant vineyards and a living.

Two wineries heralded the beginnings of a quality revolution. Domaine Carras in Greece in the 1970s and the Golan Heights Winery in Israel in the 1980s, respectively with French and Californian consultants, showed that their countries could make world class wines. A boutique, small winery revolution took place in the 1990s, transforming the quality and variety in their respective countries. Then the large wineries

were forced to react by investing in quality,

Today, Greek and Israeli wineries are producing some great wines, and a far cry from only 20 years ago. However, marketing wise, both countries suffer from the preconceived perception that Greek wines are all retsina (the traditional wine made with the addition of pine resin) and Israeli wines are all sweet and oxidized Kiddush wines. This gives an impression that both are primarily for the ethnic market, expatriate Greeks and religious Jews. So, both countries are making wines that should interest all wine lovers and connoisseurs, but it is an ongoing battle to overcome this basic prejudice.

Israeli wine can be insular. We are submerged in the kosher bubble (though not all Israeli wine is kosher, and for that matter not all kosher wines are Israeli), but it is important to remember that kosher is not a country and Israel is not an island. We are deeply part of the Eastern Mediterranean wine region and should occasionally sniff the air, look around and learn from our wine producing neighbors like Cyprus, Lebanon, Turkey and Greece.

Boutaris is the grand family of Greek wine, and the modern wine history of this country may be understood by following this one family. When, in 1879, Yiannis Boutaris founded Boutari Winery in Naoussa, situated in the Macedonia region in the north of the country, he began arguably Greece's most important wine dynasty. He was a merchant of wine and Tsipouro, a Greek Grappa.

In 1906, he built the Zafiraki Street winery in Naoussa and moved his head office to Thessaloniki. The label I saw from that date had Ladino (with Hebrew letters) on the label, evidence of the large, thriving Sephardic Jewish population of Salonica at the time. Incidentally, that was also the year Baron Edmond de Rothschild founded the wine-growers' cooperative in Israel.



YIANNIS BOUTARIS, founder of Kir-Yianni Winery, tasting wine in the barrel room. (Courtesy)

Boutari Winery depended on local vineyards and sustained the grape growers when it was not a secure profession. His great-grandson Yiannis Boutaris took over the family winery with his brother in the late 1960s. In the 1970s Greece started to promote wines as part of recognizing and reviving its culture. Yiannis junior instinctively understood wine was a product of a person and place and this was where the future lay. His first move was to go against company policy and plant a vineyard on a high hill in Yiannakohori. A prophet is not worshiped in his own home. His father snapped, "we are wine sellers not wine growers," but Yiannis persevered.

Yiannis started planting vineyards and encouraged the large monopoly company to regionalize, by opening a series of small wineries close to local vineyards. He even encouraged growers to become boutique wineries using their own grapes. This policy was against the interests of the parochial, conservative family winery, but massively in the interest of the development of Greek wine. He also developed the concept of a wine route to encourage tourism.

Eventually Konstantine Boutaris, the sales orientated brother, and Yiannis the winemaking artist could no longer work together. In a similar schism to the Mondavi family in California, Yiannis the fourth generation upped and left, leaving behind his heritage and inheritance, to become a boutique winery pioneer. His only request was to take a vineyard. He took the precious Yiannakohori vineyard he had planted, and founded the small, quality and terroir-driven winery called Ktima Kir-Yianni (*Ktima* means Domaine or Chateau).

This was in 1997 and it symbolized the boutique revolution in Greece and galvanized others, in the same way that Castel and Margalit wineries led the small winery boom in Israel.

Greece has something Israel does not have, and that is quality indigenous varieties making unique and different wines. The three most famous Greek varieties are the white Assyrtiko grown at its best on the volcanic island of Santorini, the red Aghiorghitiko grown in Nemea of the Peloponnese, and the red Xinomavro grown in Naoussa in the northern region of Macedonia. They have also revived local varieties, perhaps the most well-known is Malagousia. Their success with this should encourage those with hopes for Marawi and Jandali in Israel.

If Assyrtiko is leading worldwide appreciation for Greek white wines, the Xinomavro is the red equi-

alent. Aghiorghitiko is plush, fruit forward and more international in style, whereas the Xinomavro is angular, edgy and bristling with character and individuality.

Part of the Yiannis Boutaris scheme was to focus on Xinomavro, identifying and preserving the best clones and then making the finest, most unique Greek wine possible. Now the word Xinomavro gives a clue – it translates to acid black, and it produces a tannic, acidic wine with savory and earthy notes. Many describe it as a Greek Pinot Noir. It can have some of the perfume of an aged Burgundian Pinot, but is more like a Nebbiolo, the grape of Barolo.

There are two obvious landmarks of Ktima Kir-Yianni. One is a 200-year-old watchtower overlooking the vineyards. Then there are the old olive trees within the vineyard itself. These both form the logo of the winery and appear on the labels.

Kir-Yianni returned winemaking to the vineyard. The country's best experts studied rootstocks, clones, trellising methods, vineyard aspect and planting density. Soils were analyzed and divided into parcels. Each parcel is today cultivated separately according to its own needs. Kir-Yianni after 20 years is still at the forefront of viticultural and oenological research.

Then Yiannis the younger purchased a winery in the mountainous Amyneon in eastern Florina, the coldest winemaking region in Greece. Kir-Yianni uses this facility primarily for making whites, rosé and lighter, fruitier reds.

When the mercurial Yiannis Boutaris stepped down and went into politics, his eldest son Stelios Boutaris then took over the winery. He is charismatic, good looking with a hearty laugh. He has turned a unique winery into a business with style and flair whilst maintaining loyalty to the winery's roots.

He is helped by his younger brother, Mihalis, a grad-

uate in viticulture and oenology of University of California at Davis. It is not a winery standing still. They have just completed a new underground barrel cellar and next step is a new visitors' center.

As for their father, he became the mayor of Thessaloniki. His respect for the Jewish history and the Jewish people was a theme of his *raison d'être*. This was even to the point of symbolically wearing a yellow star at his inauguration, as a protest against the far right wing Golden Dawn party.

As for the wines, I love the easy drinking refreshing Paranga red and white at one end of the spectrum, and the flagship wine, the Block 5 Diaporos, a Xinomavro wine with a touch of Syrah, is bewitching. Xinomavro at its best. It has great aging potential... and it certainly needs time.

The Boutaris are the kings of Xinomavro and believe this unique variety is at its best in the beautiful region of Naoussa. For those of us tired of in-your-face varieties, it is a welcome opportunity to sample something different and it represents far better value than Burgundy or Barolo!

Israel could learn a lot from Greek wine from their wine tourism. The Greeks organized a Wine Roads of Northern Greece creating eight routes connecting the vineyards of Thessaly, Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace. They could also teach us a thing or two about marketing the wines of a country. Witness the success of "All About Greece," the company formed to advance Brand Greece in the US.

I certainly recommend you go Greek, explore their wines, taste when you can and don't miss the opportunity to visit wineries when you are on holiday. For anyone who believes in ABC (Anything but Cabernet & Chardonnay), this is the country for you! ■

The writer has advanced Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is referred to as "the English voice of Israeli wine."