

# THE ANDRÉ L SIMON LECTURE 2014

Presented by

**Konstantinos Lazarakis MW**

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## **“Rediscovering Greek Wines”**

There are several reasons why fine Greek wine has emerged on the global scene in the past fifteen years rather than earlier. Wine consumers are nowadays more receptive to the message conveyed by Greek wine. It is not just a matter of quality improvement, but also a matter of dynamics and trends throughout the global wine market. Greece is now able to offer unique and far more competitive wines in the marketplace.

The rise in quality as a result of improving methods of production and accumulated know-how is only half of the story of modern Greek wine. Clearly, this half is not unique to Greece. Over the past two decades, many new countries or new regions in established wine-producing countries boast an impressive track record in quality improvement. With information being freely and easily available, there are no more secrets to hide in the cellar or in the vineyard. Top wine industry executives admit that “there is no way of keeping knowledge away from competitors. All you can aim for is to speed up the process of applying this knowledge and get results faster.”

Freely available knowledge means that good quality no longer suffices. Back in the '80s and, to a certain degree, the '90s, quality was frequently perceived as the lack of winemaking faults. As long as the wine was not oxidised, volatile, unripe or overripe, it was considered good. Current standards go far beyond this benchmark and customer expectations are higher than ever. The term “good” has been redefined through modern winemaking practices and, in essence, is now taken for granted. A wine must be “very good” or “excellent” to deserve even a mention, let alone secure a bright future. Thankfully, this has not translated into a rise in prices; quite the contrary, in fact. Thanks to competition, especially from the New World, for a given level of wine quality – if one can define such a level – prices have been going down steadily in real terms for a number of years. With the exception of some iconic wines which, as we all know, command sky-high prices, the present wine market is a wine lover’s paradise. Top quality wines can be enjoyed at affordable prices, provided consumers are open-minded and willing to experiment with wines off the beaten track.

The wide availability of technology and know-how may have pushed average quality higher than ever before, but unfortunately, at the same time, globalisation has increased uniformity across the whole spectrum of styles. Although the shelves of retail shops and wine lists may offer a wide selection of countries and regions, when the wines are judged by what is in the glass, a sense of sameness prevails. One of the main reasons for this is the predominance of a small number of varieties. International varieties, mainly of French origin, and varietally labelled wines completely changed the face of the wine trade in the '80's and '90s.

Greece, on the other hand, has a formidable array of indigenous varieties with which to compete in the current marketplace, most of which have a distinctive personality and unique features. I believe you have been given some notes in your programme outlining the principal characteristics of the grape varieties you will be tasting this week, so there is no need for me to elaborate further on this subject. You should note, however, that a lot of research is going on and new potentially exciting varieties are discovered almost every year!

However, international varieties are important and Greeks can make some excellent wines out of cabernet, syrah, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and even viognier. I believe indigenous varieties will always be the spearhead of our export efforts but, for some markets, the better known international grapes can be very useful as they offer a certain degree of familiarity. As a famous sommelier in Austria once told me, “persuading someone to drink Greek wine is already hard enough, so you don’t need to have to explain the differences between an agiorgitiko and a xinomavro - you can suggest a lovely Greek merlot instead!”

As far as wine consumption is concerned, Greece is a very mature market; wine was not imposed on the people as a marketing initiative. The Greeks have been drinking wine for thousands of years and have come to know what they want. They consume wine on several occasions, mainly with food, and enjoy those styles that combine best with their climate and food: flavourful, though light and refreshing, especially in the summer. On the other hand, many Greek dishes have a lot of acidity and consequently need wines with ‘angles’ rather than ‘roundness’. Greek wine producers, largely reliant on their national market, have to make wines that fit these requirements.

As you might have noticed, Greeks are also not short of temperament. This is especially true of Greek winemakers and it is an element that adds an extra dimension to their wines. With such a long tradition behind them, they often follow their instincts rather than apply rigorous rules. You will see this week that, even in a small place like Santorini, neighbouring producers can produce very different styles of wine that reflect their individual personalities.

There is a serious misconception that cool climate is essential for making fine wine, especially white, and therefore Greece is too hot a country to be a potential source of great wine. Nothing could be further away from the truth! First of all, there are regions in Greece, especially in the north, where the climate is far closer to that of Bordeaux than, say, here in Santorini. Furthermore, it is not true to say that all great wine is made in ‘cool’ climates in the conventional sense of the word - just look at Priorato or Chateaufort du Pape, both made in what most people would call warm climates. Coolness of climate is a variety-specific notion; Burgundy is too cold for merlot but too hot for riesling, for example. Cool climate in wine terms is a climate where the grower struggles to produce ripe fruit every year and, in Greece, there are numerous variety/region combinations which, under this definition, clearly come under ‘cool climate’. Here in Santorini, on the other hand, the hot, arid climate would cause many international grape varieties to produce rather flat wines, whereas the assyrtico grape, with its capacity to retain its acidity in very hot climates, produces spectacular white wines.

Another testimony to the quality of Greek wines is their ageing capacity. By this I don’t mean that they merely change in the bottle over time, but that they seriously improve in quality. A ten-year-old dry assyrtico, for example, often resembles a top quality Grand Cru Chablis. Many xinomavros from the 60’s are still vibrant and fresh. Even moschofilero, which is generally considered a DYA (Drink Youngest Available) grape, can provide surprising results with ageing; during a recent Masters’ of Wine visit to Greece, one of the most impressive wines was a 17-year old moschofilero - who could have predicted this?

Alcohol level is another issue. Alcohol is a soft element in a wine’s structure and an elevated level, 13.5% abv or above, creates a round feeling on the palate. High alcohol wines, 14% and above, are easier to appreciate instantly, but feel heavier after

a glass or two. Alcohol levels are rising by the vintage in most regions around the world, even in traditional areas like Bordeaux, where 14% is nowadays not uncommon. This global tendency is man-made and market-driven and has nothing to do with global warming, but it has often been criticised by leading wine experts. A wine must not numb the senses but instead should encourage the drinker to enjoy a second glass. Some low alcohol wines, 10% or lower, have been “custom-made” in some countries as a response to this criticism, but then they usually offer less enjoyment than fresh fruit juice! Food-friendliness and a moderate level of alcohol (say 12-14% abv) are becoming of paramount importance and this is exactly what the Greeks have been expecting and getting from a decent glass of wine for thousands of years!

An interesting example of the way the Greek wine-producing culture has become more relevant in the international scene is the current “hunt for terroir”. As more and more different grape varieties are planted all over the world, the future commercial potential of varietal wines is limited and many wine-producing countries are placing their bets on demonstrating that the exceptional quality and character of their wines is due to a unique terroir which is impossible to reproduce anywhere else. There are two major prerequisites in producing true terroir wines rather than marketing-driven false claims. The first one is time. Terroir is a very complex concept, involving numerous parameters which demand a very long time to comprehend. Given the viticulturalist’s once-a-year opportunity to work at a vineyard, understanding a specific terroir requires time and commitment over many generations. The second prerequisite is small-scale production. It is much easier for smaller operations to select vineyards with a similar soil and mesoclimate, two vital constituents of what is understood as terroir. Greek wines fulfil both these requirements. Wine production in Greece has been mostly on a small, artisan scale, by people “conversing with their land”. Furthermore, Greeks have been cultivating their vineyards long enough to fully grasp the potential of their terroirs. Terroir wine, the Holy Grail of many, is something which comes naturally to Greece.

It is highly unlikely that Greek wine will ever sell in huge volumes in the global market, for the simple reason that there are not enough vineyards: wine production is 30% smaller in the whole of Greece than in Bordeaux. However, some Greek wines are among some of the best value-for-money buys in the world today. I have no doubt that, if one were to change some of the labels from ‘Made in Greece’ into ‘Made in Tuscany’, price tags could easily double! But this undervalued situation will gradually change as Greeks learn to market their wines better and consumer awareness of Greek wine increases.

Over the next twenty years, with ever-increasing competition, standing out in the wine world will be a far bigger challenge, which will permeate the whole global wine industry, from the grower to the winemaker, to the wine trader and down to the final consumer. Greek wines provide an exciting option for those willing to explore beyond the familiar. Considering all of you are lovers of good wine, I suggest you should not miss this opportunity.

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