

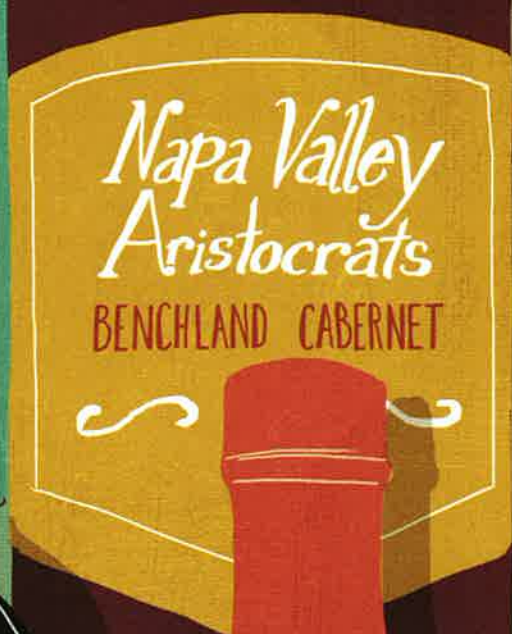
CLASSIC WINES - PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

Wine & Spirits

SPECIAL ISSUE

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—Konstantinos Lazarakis, MW

“My first experiences with Santorini were that it is a zippy, high-acid wine, very mineral, citrus, and great with grilled fish. That was classic Santorini. But what were they making fifty years ago? A lot of winemakers are thinking about this now, and some of what was classic then is making its way back around.”
—Frankie Mace



Santorini *By Tara Q. Thomas*

Saline and mouthwatering, stony to the point of being severe.

That’s what most people know Santorini as: a white made from one of the most acidic grapes on the planet (assyrtiko), which channels the barren landscape of this blasted volcano through its stark, mineral flavors. There is often little fruit to speak of; the wine is instead lean and steely.

And, in fact, steely is accurate: What we’ve come to think of as classic Santorini is vinified entirely in stainless steel tanks—refrigerated to help retain the freshness of the flavors in the warm climate.

These temperature-controlled tanks, however, didn’t exist on the island until 1987, when Yannis Voyatzis, a winemaker for Boutari, tasked with checking out the potential for good wine on the island, had some shipped in for an experimental vintage. The result was promising and the company built a winery, outfitting it with plenty of tanks.

Today, there’s not a winery on the island that doesn’t have at least a few temperature-controlled tanks, if not an entire cellar outfitted with them, for their aim is completely different now than BB (before Boutari). Back then, people didn’t pick until the middle of September or even later, into October; by then, the grapes were deeply colored and laden with sugar. They’d let the fruit ferment until it stopped, which was often before all the sugars were used up; they were nonetheless high in alcohol (14 or 15 percent) and robust in flavor—as much due to ripeness as oxidation.

Anyone who’s sat in front of a typical *mezes* spread, with all its garlicky dips and oil-drenched vegetables and salty cheeses, can well imagine that a powerful wine has its place here. Consider, too, that the Greeks used to like to water their wines back to make them more refreshing.

Today’s wines are a world away—picked as early as the end of July and vinified with more attention to cleanliness and protection from air, many using cultured yeasts. Although today, there’s also more interest in taking a look back to see what traditions might have been lost. There are several Santorinis being made now without added yeasts, and some with oak barrels, not for flavor as much as for the oxygen exchange it affords. The result is the most diverse field of Santorini styles since the new era of stainless-steel Santorini started.

So what then constitutes a classic Santorini today? A crowd of names comes to mind—Argyros, Boutari, Gaia, Hatzidakis and Sigalas, just for starters. Each is exemplary, redolent of the island in its structure and flavors. But each is also distinctly different. Pushed to pick one, I couldn’t. Neither could Kamal Kouiri, who makes regular trips to Greece to maintain his exhaustive list of Greek wines at *Molyvos* in NYC, when I asked him. So we decide to set up a blind tasting to consider the field.

We rope in Konstantinos Lazarakis, an MW who teaches WSET courses in Athens, who happens to be visiting NYC. We call up Beth von Benz, who’s been championing Greek wines since she ran the wine list at *Milos* in the late 1990s, and we ask Frankie Mace, sommelier at *Amali* in NYC, to join us, too.

At the tasting table, we try to set the bar before we taste. “Crisp, mineral wine, sometimes with some primary fruit but not usually,” Lazarakis offers. “Saline aromas,” adds von Benz. “Fruit is secondary,” says Kouiri. “Santorini is about minerality, structure and acidity.”

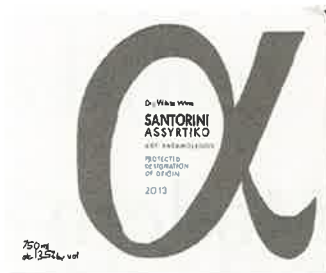
But then Mace disrupts the peace. “My first experiences with Santorini were that it is a zippy, high-acid wine, very mineral, citrus, and great with grilled fish. That was classic Santorini. But what were they making fifty years ago? A lot of winemakers are thinking about this now, and some of what was classic is making its way back around.”

Kouiri counters that this is contrasted by a fascination with the power of aromatic yeasts, which can add fruity aromas where there aren’t any (as in assyrtiko grown on the island). There’s also a rush to get the wines on the market every year, resulting in some stinky, reductive tones that can be mistaken for volcanic scents. “If I had the power I’d lock all the cellars in Santorini and not release anything for twenty-four months,” he jokes.

While we’ve gathered some wines that have been aged in oak, Lazarakis bristles at the mere mention of it. “I hate it,” he says bluntly. “For me, it’s working against the fiber of Santorini. I’d rather see people do more interesting things in stainless steel and cement.” And they are: For instance, many producers are using wine lees to build in texture and complexity. In general, Lazarakis finds, there’s been a maturation in wine style, something he notices in what he calls “palate shape.” “If you subscribe to this idea that a wine has a shape in the mouth, then you often note that some Old World wines start slow, then beef up in the middle, whereas New World wines start big, then diminish.” Early Santorini often fell more in the New World, big-entry category, trumpeting a single line of volcanic flavor. The good ones today have more complexity, even multiple lines of flavor working in harmony.

But, we agree, “classic” does not mean “best.” What follows are the highlights of our tasting, with notes on the wines that came closest to hitting what we considered classic Santorini.

Santorini: Can You Taste It?



Sigalas 2014 Santorini Assyrtiko

Diamond Importers, Chicago, IL

One sip of this wine fills me with the same feeling I have when the ferry approaches Fira, the port in Santorini's caldera, where a sheer wall of volcanic stone rises up to meet the sun, blindingly white buildings at the top. Both the view and the wine are breathtaking in their size and beauty. But while everyone on the panel agrees that the wine has Santorini's hallmark chalky minerality and saline flavors, there's a richness to the texture that's unusual. In fact, Sigalas is in Oia, in northeast Santorini, where the vineyards are lower and flatter than most parts of the island, and tend to give richer wines.

Gaia 2014 Santorini Thalassitis Assyrtiko

Athenee Importers & Distributors, Hempstead, NY

Pungently, starkly mineral, with only hints of green herbal notes, everyone agrees this is unmistakably Santorini, yet too extreme to be called "classic." Winemaker Yiannis Paraskevopoulos has long favored the grapes that grow in Pyrgos, the highest point on the island, where the grapes ripen weeks later than those closer to the sea. He works to keep air away from the wine, from picking through to bottling, which he does under screwcap, one of the few on the island to do so.

Canava Roussos 2008 Santorini Vedema Nykteri

Vingreco Wines, Winston-Salem, NC

Roussos is one of the oldest wineries on the island, founded in 1836, and a guardian of traditions here. This bottle is a Nykteri, an old style of wine typically picked late and aged in casks. While we all marvel at the vibrancy contained within its roasted-pineapple and sun-warmed earth tones, Lazarakis points out that Nykteri, although traditional, is not "classic" by today's standards. "These are not for the faint-hearted or designated drivers," he points out, "but they have a place. Older Santorini is one of the weapons we should have to show what Santorini can be." Kouiri agrees, adding, "This is the sort of Santorini you'd want if you had some roast lamb," a classic combination well worth getting to know.

Boutari 2014 Santorini Assyrtiko

Terlato Wines Int'l., Lake Bluff, IL

"This is a good Santorini," says Kouiri, "but I like my Santorini more mineral driven." "The fruit is almost tropical," von Benz adds. Of the several Santorini cuvées Boutari makes, this is the entry level, designed to appeal to a wide variety of drinkers, including those who've never experienced the sometimes aggressively mineral rasp of assyrtiko grown on Santorini's chalky soils.

Estate Argyros 2014 Santorini Assyrtiko

Athenee Importers & Distributors, Hempstead, NY

"This is accurate," says Kouiri. "It doesn't have the feel of manipulation of some others, nor the ripeness; instead it's focused on piercing minerality." Clear and clean, Argyros's Santorini has long been a benchmark, as the family is the largest landholder on the island and is based in Episkopi Gonia, the historic center of the wine industry.

Artemis Karamolegos 2014 Santorini Assyrtiko

Verity Wine Partners, NY

"You can really see the lava," says von Benz. "And there's that note of lemon oil—that's another note I think of as classic in Santorini." Kouiri agrees: "You can feel the minerality from the start to the finish, the salinity." Lazarakis comments on how the wine starts out fresh and simple, then builds flavor slowly and steadily. There's nothing extreme about this wine; it simply ticks off the requirements of a Santorini: clarity, minerality and acidity, all in balance. In fact, it makes sense when we see that it's Karamolegos: Based in Exo Gonia, where most of the island's wine industry is centered, the family has grown grapes on Santorini since 1952. By 2004, when Artemis Karamolegos built a winery and began making wine, he was managing 62 acres of vineyards, much of which he owns. "They *know* the vineyards," says Kouiri. And we taste it in the glass. There is nothing stylized about it. It's classic Santorini. ■

"You can really see the lava, and there's that note of lemon oil—that's another one of those notes I think of as classic in Santorini."

—Beth von Benz

"Fruit is secondary; Santorini is about minerality, structure and acidity."

—Kamal Kouiri

