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Greece: Emphasis Santorini

August 29, 2014

The pretty, tourist-attraction island of Santorini also happens to be a tiny (and increasingly exceptional) wine region with unusual *terroir*. Although I have included a sprinkling of other wines, this report mostly features Santorini wines. First, there is a group of new-release, 2013 Santorinis (earlier issues this year featured others, like Gai'a and Sigalas - they arrived on time for earlier issues and I don't like to delay releases when possible). The nice thing here is that pretty much all of the wines show well. Some are better than others, but the quality relating to the price overall demonstrates again how successful Santorini is these days with its trademark grape, Assyrtiko. This grapey in various styles is seen here, including Vinsanto and Nykteri. A word to the wise: Even as a regular un-oaked table wine, this grape often has hidden layers. The new releases can seem approachable early on, but that is often deceptive. If you hold them in your cellar (levels vary, of course) for 1-2 years, or come back to them the next day, they are usually better, far more expressive and finally show their underlying stuff and structure. Granting, as always, that some styles and levels are certainly more approachable and less age-worthy than others, that's a long-winded way of saying that if you're thinking of plunging into 2013s right now, you'll likely be even happier if you try them next year instead, or at least give them some time in the glass. These wines age reasonably well (again, of course, there are different levels) and can actually improve in the cellar. Let air and warmth help after you pull them from the refrigerator. You'll benefit from doing so. That is often true even with the less expensive ones, let alone the big boys.

With respect to vintage conditions, Stefanos Georgas of Estate Argyros gave me a good summary, "*The 2013 vintage follows the difficult vintage of 2012 when the strong winds have damaged the vines and the yields were extremely low. For 2013, the yields were low, as the vines didn't quite recover from the damage (it was expected). Weather conditions were very good and we had the normal amount of rainfall during winter. The harvest started earlier than 2012, with some parcels on the island. Then our best parcels were harvested at the same time as 2012. Additionally, we have experienced a general power blackout on the island. We didn't face any problems as we had a generator. The wines have a great level of natural acidity (very low pH), the low residual sugar and good alcohol level. We believe, for our wines, 2013 is an excellent vintage with typical aromas (citrus and lime white peach) and minerals. They are more structured and rich with long finish. The 2013 vintage has a great aging ability, especially the Estate Argyros Assyrtiko.*"

Vinsanto Heaven

Second, there is a group of Vinsanto releases to go with the dry wines. They are certainly a treasure on the island that people should know more about. As impressive as they are individually, as a group they demonstrate diversity in style - from the lower alcohol, zesty, sweet and sunny wines to the bigger, drier and more powerful. They age well and become more complex and more interesting with age, too. Several highly rated ones, from the decadent Karamolegos, to the more muscular Boutari and the gentle, wonderfully complex Canava

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roussos, are polar opposites. I suspect many will have strong preferences as to their favorites, but I loved them all for what each offered. Often, the more important question for me was "different" rather than "better."

Note that even the drier ones have a ton of residual sugar, but the balancing acidity here is high, so they rarely seem as sweet as the very hefty numbers suggest. The acidity can make these wines quite thrilling, in fact, rather than cloying. For one example, at Sigalas (not represented as I was advised that the current release is still the 2004, already reviewed) the winery told me that *"we use sun-dried grapes so we have concentrated sugars (about 420 g/l) so the alcohol level at the end of the fermentation is between 9-9.5%. At this level we have rich and concentrated aromas and high acidity that gives us great balance between sugars and acidity."* For some, however, the alcohol rises quite a bit and the sugar drops notably. The Argyros 2007, for instance, has 13% alcohol and 224 g/l. So, they don't all have identical profiles. Yet, as noted, most of them manage to work it out in their own styles.

The wines with more character, are forced to leave the appellation of origin because their wines often get rejected for being different and not following the typicity (!?) of the region, which is sad, as these are often among the best wines produced in the region. Rueda and Verdejo are becoming a commodity in the local market.

These wines age well, too. While wines like this can change dramatically in character as they oxidize over time, they are pretty hard to kill. Most will last a couple of decades, many will last far longer. Take the drinking windows just as an advisory - they have typically been too conservative in a certain sense, largely because of that potential style change. There should be no rush to drink them, though, and they will typically improve in the bottle, not just hold.

Prices are in general reasonable, as the category is obscure in the U.S.A. In fact, when I expressed disappointment that the Karamolegos Vinsanto was not imported, the winery's representative wondered if Americans would really be interested. Well, folks, if you like dessert wines, you should be. Well-priced, exceptional and often thrilling, these wines deserve a higher profile.

—Mark Squires

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