Rediscovered Classics

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, stee’y 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
Voyazis, 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 mezze
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 Santorinios
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 Kouri, 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 Kouri. “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.”

Kouri 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 cells 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 winemaking 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.

Illustration by Mike Hutton.
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
Athenée 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
Vingreso 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
Athenée 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.

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—Beth von Benz

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