

Hellenistic Country Cordial — June 2008

Οίνοι — Wine Notes

Course I. *Tapas a la griega* — Ρετσίνα (Retsina) Flight

Retsina has been around for a long time, at least 2000 years. Back in the day, your standard-issue amphora wasn't exactly airtight. Winemakers took to sealing them with Aleppo Pine (*Pinus halepensis*) resin for pragmatic reasons, then developed a taste for the pine itself. So much so that even after the use of barrels began in third-century CE Rome, the Greeks continued adding resin for aesthetic reasons.

Dubious 20th-century Greek winemaking left a bad taste on many a cheap-gyros-snarfing American tongue, and retsina is regarded by many as a poor excuse for plonk. Some of the blame goes arguably to over-chilling, which reduces the subtleties of the wine to one-dimensional pine. In fact, retsina can be the perfect thing for the occasion — possibly even this one.

So free your palate, stop thinking *Pine-Sol®* and get your resinated *Rhoditis* on!

• Gaia Estate *Ritinitis Nobilis NV*

This one will make you rethink Retsina! From GreekWineMakers.com :

Gaia's is the hippest of the new, hip retsinas. The idea of putting an upscale face on the genre may seem, to Americans, akin to spending \$500 for a paint job on a Yugo, but if this wine is to be faulted, it is for its subtlety [we've noticed that experienced wine drinkers are the ones who wax nostalgic about retsina anyway — it's the new blood that gets its kicks from the put-downs].

Be that as it may, this is a wine with some fruit to it. It's actually a varietal from low yield Aigalia Roditis, stainless steel-fermented with a quiet dose of resin from the *Pinus halepensis* pine tree [Gaia Estate sought out the exact species; typically it may be any old resin]. It is a fun wine, citrusy and aromatic, with little resin flavor on the tongue. It is as elegant as retsina gets—certainly not one that begs for water or ice.

It is a wine that makes a statement: retsina is a sore point for the new Greek wine industry. Dealing with it head-on is healing. This is a new twist on a tradition that predates Western sensibilities about wine. The tradition has its nobility, and this clean, sophisticated version pays homage to that tradition.

• Malamatina Retsina NV

We're told this is the best-selling retsina in the US. Nevertheless, we had to give it a shot, if only for the fun of popping the crown on these cute half-liter bottles. Can't you see yourself cruising through Thessaloniki in a low-rider tossing back a five of the 'Matina with your homeopoi? No? OK, well, anyway, they've been making Malamatina since 1895. There's your cred. Opa 2 tha μαύρο.

• Patraiki Retsina NV

Patraiki is a cooperative in Patras, in the Peloponesian prefecture of Achaia. Established in 1918, they strive for quality while producing a wide range of wines, including this reputedly strong retsina. We love the old-school label.

Course II. *Μεζές* — Gaia Estate *Θαλασσίτης 2007* (Thalassitis Santorini)

We fell hard for this focused, articulate Assyrtiko. Turns out it's a cult pour in the Old Country, one that Greeks are shocked to find here in Portland. Like finding, oh, *Roads End Oregon Pinot Noir* in Santorini. (No, we didn't get paid to say that. Yet.)

From allaboutgreekwine.com/wineries/gaia :

Assyrtiko is perhaps the only Mediterranean variety of grape to flourish under such difficult climatic conditions. From poor, porous soil formed by volcanic activity and composed largely of pumice, we harvest fully mature

grapes with a relatively high acidity. Our vineyard, located on the Southeastern slopes of Episkopi is composed entirely of 70–80-year-old ungrafted vines with a dramatically low yield.

Thalassitis is a bone-dry wine with a delicate honeysuckle aroma and a crisp finish... a white wine of a strong personality.

One of our favorite things about Santorini is the local vine training method. From www.greekproducts.com/santowines/santorini.html :

Santorini's ecological conditions have produced over time a unique type of vine pruning that growers call "kouloura" (curl), because its shape resembles a round basket. The basket-shaped vines protect the soft and tender grape leaves from being damaged by the island's strong wind and thin sand.

Ponder that as you take a good moment to savor this exemplary Assyrtiko!

Course III. *Secondo* — Καρυδάς Νάουσα 2004 (Karydas Naoussa)

Xinomavro is the queen of northern Greek grapes, and this Karydas is a suitably regal example. Exotic, intricately structured, brilliantly open-ended, this wine wasn't the only Greek red that knocked us out, but knock us out it did, and it was definitely the most evocative of place.

People's need for reference points takes them to Piemonte and many of the great French appellations. That's fine as far as it goes, but I don't think it goes very far. There's certainly no mistaking this for an international.

From winelibrary.com :

Specializing in the Xinomavro grape, Karydas Estate is perfectly situated on the slopes of Gastra just south of Naoussa. The soil composition of clay, sand and limestone offers excellent drainage and Karydas's 2.1 acre vineyard annually produces 15,000 bottles of exceptional wine. Petros Karydas and his son spend countless hours caring for vines that were planted in 1980.

Karydas now makes one of the finest Xinomavro wines in Naoussa and is known as a leading next-generation winemaker. A difficult grape to master, Xinomavro requires constant attention but Karydas produces rich ageworthy wines that are often likened to Nebbiolo-based wines from Piedmont, Italy.

Ageworthy, no doubt, but not tonight!

Course IV. *Σαλάτα*

Rather than tie the *salata* to a particular pairing, we've indulged our curiosity and, we hope, yours. We'll bring out a variety of interesting bottles (some of which may capriciously turn up earlier in the evening). There are a pair of vintages of the well-regarded **Kir Gianni Akakies Rosé**, a couple of **Agiorgitiko** selections, straight and blend, a fascinating **Rhodos Amorgiano** (aka Mandelaria) and one or two other tricks up our sleeve. Taste this, sip that, trade with your neighbor, enjoy the ride.

Course V. *Γλυκό* — Samos Cooperative **Muscat Grand Cru 2005 / 2002**

Some people insist they don't like dessert wines. Too many encounters with grandma's cloying Côtes de Butterscotch or something. Oh well, more for the rest of us.

They've been making wines on Samos since at least 2800 BCE, date of the oldest wine vessels found on the island. In the 1500s the Muscat Blanc à Petit Grains came to the island and became the local favorite. This is the great grape of most French *vins doux naturels* and — under the name Moscato Bianco — the Astis, as well as some Tokaji.

In 1934 the Union of Vinicultural Cooperatives of Samos ushered in the age of modern winemaking on the island. Conceivably we could be drinking their original vintage, as some of these wines age like monsters. But we'll just have to make do with the young stuff.