

Agiorgitiko? Xinomavro?

Learn a few tongue-twisting grape names and enjoy the emerging wines of Greece

Bill Daley, Tribune food and wine reporter

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A legion of Greek winemakers is intent on recapturing the country's ancient viticultural glory. They aim to break the stereotype that all Greek wines are that mix of plonk and pine resin known as retsina.

Last summer's Olympic Games in Athens gave some of Greece's more popular white wines a boost, but Greek wines remain largely unknown to most Americans. In the Chicago area, for example, only 1,995 cases of Greek wine were sold in a 52-week period ending March 12, according to consumer research firm ACNielsen. Compare that to the more than 300,000 cases each of Italian and Australian wines sold then.

Sunday's celebration of Easter by the Orthodox churches, including the Greek, is a good reason to enjoy some of Greece's new reds.

The biggest hurdle with some of these Greek wines may be the names of the grapes. Saint George, also known in Greek as agiorgitiko, is a major red player, along with such grapes as xinomavro, limnio and mandilaria. A popular white wine grape is moschofilero (or moscophilero, as Wine Lover's Companion spells it). Yet a number of winemakers also produce wine blends, combining more familiar grape varieties, like merlot and cabernet sauvignon, with their Greek grapes.

These funny-sounding names, at least to American ears, may make some would-be drinkers pause, said Joe Kafka, owner of Kafka Wine Co.

"After they try it however, it's a different story," he said.

Doug Jeffers, director of wine sales at Binny's Beverage Depot, finds it "refreshing" that Greek wines aren't "overrun" with the usual French varieties.

"By using modern winemaking techniques and facilities, they are making the indigenous varieties come alive," he said. "The deserved recognition and demand for Greek wines hasn't happened yet."

Sterling Pratt of Schaefer's in Skokie believes a number of factors are working against the popularization of Greek wines in the United States.

"Greece has a dizzying array of names and little similarity to other wine regions, let alone any bargain prices. So, I'd say they're going to be at this for a while.

"On the other hand, they've been making wines for the drinking world longer than any other developed country in civilization," he added. "Maybe they don't need to be as big as Western Europe or the New World in the world market. Some dishes cry out for these classy reds and whites."

A big challenge, too, is the mind-set of the consumer.

"Interestingly, the people most resistant to these wines are the Greek-Americans," said Gregg Wilson, wine buyer for The Artisan Cellar. "They'll say, under their breath, 'You know, I'm Greek, I'm proud, but our wines are terrible.' Then I have to inform them that the wines are really pretty good after all."

Ted Diamantis, president of Diamond Importers Inc., a Chicago-based company that imports Greek wines, understands the prejudice against Greek wines.

"Greek wines have been world class, there's just been a lapse of 3,000 years," he quipped. Diamantis explained that the 400-year occupation of Greece by the Ottoman Empire seriously stifled Greek culture, including winemaking. In more recent times, he said that winemakers have been more concerned about quantity rather than quality, but that's changing. Winemakers are studying in all the world's major wine regions, he said, and they are applying those lessons back home.

"There are 300 wineries in Greece," he said. Of those, 30 are top-notch "and seven or eight stand up to any in the world."

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How to say it

Agiorgitiko: "ah-yohr-YEE-tee-koh"

Xinomavro: "zee-NOH-mah-vroh"

Limnio: "leem-NYO"

Mandilaria: "man-dee-lahr-YA"

Moschofilero: "mo-sko-FEE-leh-ro"

Source: Greekwinemakers.com

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Smooth sips of Greece

Greek wines have the most fascinating aromas, smells that immediately set the wines apart as something different. The distinct fragrance was just the first pleasant surprise encountered by the Good Eating tasting panel during an informal blind tasting of Greek red wines. The wines, a number of them blends of familiar internationally known varietals with Greek grapes, proved remarkably smooth drinking.

Panelists sampled and rated seven Greek reds with Ted Diamantis, president of Diamond Importers Inc., a company specializing in Greek wines.

1997 Chateau Carras

A blend of cabernet sauvignon and limnio grapes, this wine was full-bodied, with notes of leather and incense seasoned with salt and pepper. "Sharp, coarse but in a macho-sexy way," one panelist wrote. Serve with spinach pie, hearty pasta dishes, grilled vegetables.

(3 corkscrews) \$23

2000 Spiropoulos Red Stag Agiorgitiko

This red made from agiorgitiko had an earthy aroma and flavor, with notes of mushrooms and cherries. Serve with braised lamb, roast pork, cheese.

(2 corkscrews) \$15

-- B.D.

Sources: We found these wines at various Binny's Beverage Depot locations. Not every wine may be in stock at your local stores; prices may vary from store to store. Prices are rounded off.

Ratings key:

(4 corkscrews) Excellent

(3 corkscrews) Very good

(2 corkscrews) Good

(1 corkscrew) Fair

(No corkscrews) Poor

Hear Bill Daley on WBBM Newsradio 780 at 6:21 p.m. and 10:22 p.m. each Tuesday and 7:52 p.m. each Saturday and Sunday.