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the FOUR PILLARS of GREEK WINE

Food-friendly and inherently elegant, these surprising pours showcase the best the country has to offer.

BY SUSAN KOSTRZEWA

PHOTOS BEN FINK





Greece has been home to winemaking for more than 6,000 years—ample time to refine and transform this ancient elixir into a growing favorite of sommeliers and wine drinkers worldwide.

But, comprised of over 300 indigenous varieties as well as numerous international grapes, the pantheon of Greek wines can be overwhelming. A vast diversity of styles and flavors can be found from north to south, from mountain to sea.

Well-structured red wines, whites boasting aromatic delicacy and dessert wines with exotic spice and terroir-driven character—they're all represented in Greece.

While there's no question delicious varieties like Malagousia and Savatiano warrant exploration, wines from four major grapes exemplify the best qualities of Greek wine and are readily available in America. Versatile and distinctive, any of them will be an excellent choice for your table.





Assyrtiko (Ah-seer-tee-ko)

Greece's most popular wine in America, Assyrtiko appeals to fans of dry, focused whites, with its fresh, mineral-driven character and sea-salt finish.

That's not to say that the variety is a one-note wonder. It maintains acidity as it ripens, its expressive citrus and grapefruit flavors combining complexity with brisk balance.

Assyrtiko was originally grown in the volcanic soil of the Aegean island of Santorini, where distinctive OPAP (Controlled Appellation of Origin of Superior Quality) wines from producers like Gaia Estate and Domaine Sigalas still command an almost cult-like following. Santorini Assyrtiko yields are relatively low—a natural result of the island's old vines (some over 3,000 years old), volcanic soils, hydric stress and exposure to strong Aegean winds—adding to the wine's exclusive appeal. Visitors to the island are often surprised by the unorthodox appearance of the wild-looking shrub vines, which are woven into a basket shape to protect the fruit from harsh elements.

The island isn't the only area of Greece in which the variety is successfully grown. Assyrtiko also thrives in mainland areas like Macedonia (in the north) and Attica (near Athens), where the wines are fruitier and softer than their Santorini brethren.

In flavor, Assyrtiko is versatile. While its fresh, mineral-driven character gives it inherent balance and poise, it's also a nimble blending grape. Aromatic indigenous grapes like Athiri and Aidani, as well as Sauvignon Blanc, make harmonious blends with Assyrtiko.

Oak aging has been successfully adopted and creates white that age beautifully. Finally, new innovations in sparkling Assyrtiko are expected to vault the variety to more widespread popularity.

"Santorini Assyrtiko balance abundant fruit with high acidity and minerality, and once people try the variety with bottle age, they see its potential," says Paris Sigalas, owner of Domaine Sigala. "It offers a unique complexity not often found in white wine, but its overall style is one with which Americans can identify."

Recommended Wines

91 Argyros 2013 Estate Assyrtiko (Santorini).

Zesty lemon, mineral and sea salt on the nose lead into fresh, balanced citrus fruit and spice on the palate. Bracing, but offering attractive fruit body, the wine has poise and food-driven panache.

Athenee Importers.

abv: 13%

Price: \$35

90 Domain Sigalas 2013 Assyrtiko (Santorini).

Focused and fresh, this wine starts with aromas of snappy lemon and slate, followed by sea salt, tropical fruit and citrus on the palate. The acid-fruit interplay gives the wine an expressive and lively character.

Diamond Imports.

abv: 13.7%

Price: \$25

88 Domaine Costa Lazaridi 2013 Château Julia Assyrtiko (Drama).

This full-bodied, layered Assyrtiko from northern Greece starts with aromas of grapefruit, lemon and pineapple, followed by exotic fruit and sea salt on the palate.

Nestor Imports.

abv: 12.5%

Price: \$18

Moschofilero (Mos-ko-feel-er-o)

Moschofilero is an exotic, intensely aromatic white wine with rose and violet undertones and fresh, balancing acidity. Though its grapes are pink- and purple-skinned, the wine is made into a floral, light white very popular in Greece. Relatively unknown in America until recently, its light body and spicy, perfumed nature is increasingly attracting global fans of Muscat-style wines.

Moschofilero's traditional home is in north-central Peloponnese, on the high plateau of the Mantinia OPAP, but it's widely planted throughout Greece. Most commonly a still wine, it also makes delicious rosé, sparkling and dessert wines that are excellent enjoyed alone or paired with seafood or Middle Eastern and Asian cuisines.

Even as a still table wine, Moschofilero's expressions vary. Fresh, refined versions come mainly from Mantinia, but the variety has also gained traction when made throughout the country in sweeter, richer styles.

In the best examples, brisk acidity prevents Moschofilero from being over-sought or one-dimensional, a potential danger in a wine that's often referred to as a rose garden in a glass. The variety is sensitive to heat and rain, but can be glorious when Mother Nature and enologists treat it right.

Producers have successfully blended Chardonnay and Torrigitiko grapes with Moschofilero for sparkling wines, and with native grapes like Assyrtiko for still bottlings.

A longtime champion and pioneer of Moschofilero (and responsible for most of its popularity in Greece), the Boutari Winery has actively promoted the wine as an affordable discovery, especially for consumers new to the Greek category.

"Moschofilero is an approachable wine for young people and new wine consumers," says Yannis Voyatzis, chief winemaker at Boutari. "The profile—low alcohol, balanced—means it matches up well with international, vegetarian and tapas cuisine. It's a truly modern wine."



Recommended Wines

90 Spiropoulos 2013 Moschofilero (Mantinia). This organic offering starts with aromas of lemon blossom, rose and wet stone, followed by fresh flavors of citrus, peach and white fruits. Refined and layered. Athenee Importers.
abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$17

90 Boutari 2013 Moschofilero (Mantinia). This fresh but fruity white starts with aromas of white rose, grapefruit and citrus, followed by light and elegant flavors of lemon, grapefruit and sea salt. Terlato Wines International.
abv: 11.5% **Price:** \$16

87 Nasiakos 2012 Moschofilero (Mantinia). Brisk and fruity but with distinctive notes of spice and pear, this wine offers ripe-fruit expression and an exotic edge. Pair with grilled seafood or Chinese cuisine. Stellar Importing Company, LLC.
abv: 12% **Price:** \$16

Agiorgitiko (Ay-ee-or-yee-tee-ko)

As a red wine variety, Agiorgitiko is chameleon of sorts. Gentle and refined by nature, it lends itself to myriad expressions and styles.

At its simplest, Agiorgitiko is probably Greece's most approachable red, and pairs with almost any dish. At its best, it's a collectible and terroir-driven pour with world-class appeal.

Also known as St. George, Agiorgitiko is typically grown in Nemea OPAP in the northeastern Peloponnese, and it's one of Greece's most planted grapes. Grown in six valleys with varying soil compositions and microclimates, the "king of the Peloponnese" is favored for its rich, red-fruit, sour cherry and anisette flavors. It's sometimes compared to Sangiovese in style.

Nemea's climate is hot, but the region is hilly, so grapes benefit from high-altitude vineyards and cool nights, lending Agiorgitiko its food-friendly acidity balance. The grape's popularity has inspired producers to plant outside of Nemea, and good Agiorgitikos are now being grown in Macedonia, Attica and other parts of the Peloponnese.

Agiorgitiko's versatile nature means it's found under many guises. Light rosés, fruity, Beaujolais-style reds and "Super Nemean" blends—often with Syrah—appeal to most palates. Bolder styles

of Agiorgitiko pair well with dishes like grilled lamb and game, while more subtle expressions complement delicate dishes like grilled vegetables and salads (think beef and lentils).

Despite so much love, we recommend it, Kam

Kouri, wine director for

Molyvos restaurant in New York City, still thinks Agiorgitiko's more serious side has been overlooked.

"Oak-aged Nemea Agiorgitikos can age very well, and can be great wine made in great terroir," he says. "The wine offers good structure and character and so much diversity. Once people taste them, they're hooked."



Recommended Wines

91 Gaia Wines 2008 Gaia Estate Agiorgitiko (Nemea).

Cinnamon, black cherry and spice aromas lead into cigarbox, leather, cedar and dried cherry on the palate in this balanced, integrated red. Distinctive but versatile, this is a classic wine that will pair well with lamb and beef. Athenee Importers.

abv: 14%

Price: \$39

90 Palivou 2008 Ammos Reserve Terra Leone Single Vineyard Selection (Nemea).

Refined aromas of toasted vanilla, spicebox, plum and tobacco are followed by vibrant waves of cherry, olive, dried herb and tobacco. The wine is elegant and has soul. Stellar Importing Company, LLC.

abv: 14%

Price: \$50

88 Kouroi 2011 Agiorgitiko (Nemea).

Cherry, black-berry and exotic spice aromas start this fresh, mineral-driven red. Plum, cherry and fennel flavors are balanced and unique. Pair with lamb sausage. Nestor Imports. **Best Buy.**

abv: 13%

Price: \$10

Xinomavro (Ex-seen-o-mahv-ro)

Xinomavro is Greece's most classic, cellar-worthy red, and the country's main play on the international collectible stage.

Though very much its own wine, Xinomavro often attracts fans of Nebbiolo and Pinot Noir. It's an intriguing alternative that offers complexity and structure with a Greek, terroir-driven edge.

Like its coveted comparisons, Xinomavro can be difficult to cultivate. The wine is most successful in the four appellations of Origin of Superior Quality regions of Naoussa, Amyntaion, Rapsani and Goumenissa, but the grape is grown throughout Greece.

Xinomavro is so unique that top enologists in the country are developing specific winemaking practices, but the positive results are raising eyebrows among even the most traditional critical circles.

Winemakers manage the variety's essentially angular tannins through careful clonal selection, proper vineyard management and moderate cropping to produce multifaceted, robust wines featuring plum, dried-fruit and exotic spice flavors.

Styles vary from lean and acid-driven to more generous, oak-influenced and aged.

The variety is being used in Syrah, Merlot, Cabernet and other indigenous grape blends as well as in Pinotés. In the cellar, Xinomavro ages beautifully, and it's unusual to find 10-plus-year-old bottles still delivering vibrant fruit.

Top producers include Kir-Yianni, whose founder, Yannis Boutari, pioneered the modern Xinomavro movement in the 1970s, and Tsantali, whose Xinomavro blends exhibit benchmark elegance.

"Xinomavro gives wines that imprint the terroir, the homeland," says Panagiotis Giakidis, head enologist at Tsantali. In recent years, a notable evolution has been witnessed, and winemaking has moved from the 'rustic' character in favor of a more cosmopolitan approach, but the distinctive Xinomavro profile is still present and alluring." 🍷



Recommended Wines

90 Thymiopoulos 2012 Young Vines Xinomavro (Naoussa).

Raspberry, spicebox and cinnamon aromas start this modern-style Xinomavro. Lively acidity and ample tannic structure balance the cherry fruit. A great introduction to the variety. Athenee Importers.

abv: 13.5%

Price: \$17

89 Tsantali 2006 Reserve Xinomavro (Rapsani).

A blend of Xinomavro and the native grapes Krasato and Stavroto, this is an elegant wine showcasing aromas and flavors of plum, cherry, tobacco and violet. Mineral and coffee notes add to the poised character. Fantis Imports, Inc.

abv: 13.5%

Price: \$19

89 Chrisohoou 2010 Xinomavro (Naoussa).

This versatile red offers cola, cocoa and coffee aromas and earthy, balanced flavors of plum, dried cherry, cocoa and spice. Approachable but true to the variety, this wine is still evolving and can age for years to come. Nestor Imports.

abv: 14.5%

Price: \$15