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Good wine: Greek wines holding their own

By Mary Ross

What do Australian shiraz, German riesling, California chardonnay, merlot and (I fear soon) pinot noir have in common?

Each is a victim of its own success.

Not long ago, shiraz was a shelf bully, tripling in sales from 1999 to 2007, pinching drinkers from leaders France, Italy and Spain. But Aussie euphoria yielded overproduction, plummeting quality and prices. In 2009, sales began an annual tumble, with 2013 recording 14 percent below the peak.

German riesling suffers from association with the brand that once accounted for one quarter of American wine sales. California chardonnay has the ABC Club: Anything but chardonnay. And the movie line, "I am not drinking any #@! merlot!" crashed that wine's once-soaring sales, stimulating countless marketing studies generally titled "The Sideways' Effect."

The wines of Greece likewise suffer from an uncomplimentary association with one overexposed style — roditis, a light, drinkable (at best) rose served in countless carafes at Greek restaurants throughout America.

Just as there are majestic shiraz, elegant riesling and evocative chardonnay, merlot and (for the time being) pinot noir, the fine wines of Greece represent intriguing, refreshing and eternally modern flavors from one of the planet's most historic wine regions.

These wines don't pander to market trends. Drinkers who favor the "international style" will consider them light compared to the current "more is more" fashion. While dynamic in mineral and fruit flavors outlined by bracing acidity, they enliven — not bludgeon — the palate.

While difficult to find and harder to pronounce, once tasted, the fine wines of

Greece are impossible to forget. (To help your wine merchant, the wines listed below and "Ross's Choice" are distributed by Winebow, Chicago.)

14-18H Rose (Gai'A Wines, Nemea) enters the palate with excitement, with rich mouth feel of mineral and acid, laced with strawberry notes. The name refers to the hours spent macerating Agiorgitiko grape skins with just-pressed juice. Serve this dry, bright rose with international salads and veggie dishes including ratatouille, grilled seafood and poultry. (About \$16)

Assyrtiko "Wild Ferment" (Gai'A Wines, Santorini) boasts 100 percent Santorini Assyrtiko grapes with spontaneous fermentation of natural yeast. Upon opening, a powerful white with dried mountain herb aromas and broad mouth feel outlined by a solid grip of acid. Overnight, flavors bloom to dried peach and apricot, while maintaining firm acidity. Called "the Chablis of Greece," Assyrtiko has enough acidic backbone to pair with meats including herbed lamb, as well as rich seafood. (About \$27)

Mantinia, Domaine Spiropoulos (Mantinia) with its 100 percent Moschofilero grape yields a medium-bodied white with pure mineral aromas and bracing citrus flavors that envelop the palate, expanding to ripe orange, peach and apple. Spiropoulos is the first Greek winery to receive USDA organic certification. The wine is a sensory revelation with richly cured olives. You will not find a better wine complement to seafood, including oysters, grilled shrimp or grilled red snapper with romesco sauce. (About \$18)

Ross' choice

Naoussa "Young Vines"

Thymiopoulos Vineyards

Naoussa, Greece

2010

Ÿ Suggested retail and availability: About \$18 at wine shops and wine boutiques (distributed by Winebow, Chicago)

When the temps are up add a slight chill to this medium-bodied red to highlight enticing strawberry aromas and dry but juicy flavors of red fruits. Its gentle tannic grip and mouthwatering acidity make it perfect for casual fare including burgers (veggie, turkey, beef and lamb), grilled seafood and hard cheeses. As the weather turns cool, serve room temperature with rich appetizers, stews and pasta. Delicious all year round with Mediterranean cuisine.