



If it's good enough for the gods

BY MICHAEL VAUGHAN

It's a miracle. I am referring to the phenomenal whites now being made on the island of Santorini. I recently visited this Greek gem and was astounded by the whites made from Assyrtiko — a variety most people have never heard of. This amazing grape can ripen perfectly in the most challenging of conditions — searing heat, desert-like rainfall and extremely infertile soils. And yet, not only is the resulting wine refined and flavourful, but it also has an abundance of fresh, natural acidity.

It is said that Santorini's Assyrtiko vines are among the world's oldest — so old, that there is a movement afoot to make the ever-diminishing vineyards, which are being gobbled up by tourist development, a world heritage site. From more than 4,000 hectares, only 1,200 remain — about 75% being Assyrtiko.

Unlike any other vineyard in the world, the vines look like low tortured bushes with grape clusters often left dangling on the parched volcanic-laced stoney soil. No close spacing here, the roots need room to spread out to absorb every drop of moisture. Water is on strict allocation and evening mists are critical for survival. Vines are trained into a unique basket-shaped form, which protects them from gale-force winds.

It is here that I tasted most of the Assyrticos made at the island's dozen wineries. Santos is the biggest, an impressive co-op with more than 2,000 members. It has an excellent vis-



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itor centre and a bevy of pretty decent wines. I was most impressed, however, with one of the smaller producers, Sigalas, owned by Paris Sigalas, a mathematician by training who started the winery in 1991. Today his whites are hailed as being the best in Greece.

In one of those weird twists of fate, I was able to do a vertical tasting of Sigalas Assyrticos thanks to the Toronto-based wine agent Steve Kriaris, who owns the Kolonaki Group. The **Sigalas 2005 Santorini**, despite being 14% alcohol, is very well integrated with lots of bright, fresh, ripe lemon-melon flavours. It's easy to drink and perfection with seafood. It's available at only \$19.95 from the agent. The fleshier 2003 at \$26.95 can also be ordered from Kolonaki. (Contact them at 416-630-7392.)

The bad news is that even though this white has been submitted to Vintages a number of times, Vintages consistently refused to taste it. The good news is that it will be at this weekend's Taste of the Danforth Greek Wine Garden (located at Pape and Danforth), where you can personally check out the goods by buying sample tickets.

Also on tap is another gold medal-winning Santorini white, which is being released at the LCBO on Sept. 15. **Boutari 2006 Santorini** at \$15.95 has an attractive, slightly spicy, ripe apricot nose and dry, zesty, ripe melon-apple flavours. Compare both for yourself. If you like it, Kolonaki has it available by the case at only \$14.95 a bottle, which is a dollar cheaper than at Vintages.

While some less expensive Greek wines are challenging, bargains do exist. At only \$8.15, for instance, **Kourtakis 2004 Vin de Crete Red** will definitely hit the spot on a hot summer day, especially if slightly chilled. It's light in alcohol (only 12%), dry, medium-light bodied, with slightly spicy, plummy, red cherry flavours and a Beaujolais-like crispness.

As for great Greek reds, they do exist. Future updates from my Greek wine odyssey will keep you abreast of what's worth buying. Also this weekend is the Niagara Farm to Table Experience on Aug. 12. It features local tomatoes and is presented by Chef Stephen Treadwell and grower Dave Perkins. Held at Château des Charmes winery from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m., tickets are \$50. For details, call the winery at 1-800-263-2541.

National Post
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