

## Greece

10 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

**In a nutshell:** Distinctive indigenous varieties with great potential but hard to sell outside Greece.

**Main grapes:** Assyrtiko, Rhoditis, Muscat, Savatiano, Moscophilero (white); Xynomavro, Agiorgitiko, Limnio (red).

Largely unobserved by the rest of the world, Greece has been modernising her wine industry rapidly. There is no shortage of the sort of ambitious, pig-headed wine producers with an international tasting experience keen to prove that Greece too belongs to the dynamic greater world of wine.

This is particularly thrilling in view of the fact that the Greek wine industry is so ancient and seems determined to avoid the Chardonnay- and Cabernet- only trap in its modern incarnation. It is quite possible that some of the vine varieties grown today were the same as those experienced by participants in classical symposia (much more hedonistic gatherings than their modern namesakes) and Dionysian revels. (One common and widely spread vine at least owes its name to its Greek origins: Malvasia is a corruption of the Greek port of Monemvasia, through which many ancient sweet Malvasias passed.)

Many Greek varieties are extinct or nearly so but the aromatic white Malagousia has been rescued, as has Lagorhi, and Crete's Vilana. Assyrtiko, Rhoditis and Savatiano are widely planted varieties for white wines and Xynomavro, Agiorgitiko, Limnio and Mavrodaphne some of the better-known dark-skinned grapes.

Modern Greek wine is very much more than retsina, the aggressively pine-resin-flavoured full-bodied white of blessed taverna memory (usually made from Savatiano). North-facing slopes are increasingly valued for their moderating effect on the high summer temperatures in Greece just as, for the same reason, high-altitude vineyard sites are being replanted. Wineries such as Tsantalis' extension at Aghios Pavlos south of Thessaloniki, Kourtakis at Ritsona and Boutari's outpost on Santorini are some of the world's most modern and best equipped. Greece now has small, well-funded, quality-at-all-costs winemaking establishments such as Gentilini on the almost Adriatic island of Cephalonia, Ktima Mercouri near Olympia, Pavlidis in Drama and Strofilia not far from Athens (with useful, eponymous high-quality wine bar in the city itself). The country's first modern, family-owned winery was Chateau Carras, established in Halkidiki in the late 1960s by ship-owner John Carras.

The vinescape is changing rapidly, but some of the most interesting wines to reach export markets are the scented dry whites made from Robola grapes on Cephalonia and Rhoditis of Patras, intense mineral whites made from Assyrtiko on the island of Santorini, firm and generally oak-aged reds made from Xynomavro in Naoussa and Amyndeon in the far north, intensely perfumed Agiorgitiko grown at Nemea on the east coast of the Peloponnese and a host of sweet wines such as Muscats of Samos, Lemnos and Patras, which also produces some gloriously mellow wood-aged Mavrodaphne not unlike tawny port. There is undoubtedly, however, more to come - especially as this renaissance in winemaking, and the even more recent emphasis on the primacy of viticulture - coincides with an increased desire to be known outside Greece.

**Some favourite producers:** Alpha Estate, Antonopoulos, Biblia Chora, Georgakopoulos, Gerovassiliou, Hatzidakis, Gaia, Hatzimichalis, Kir-Yianni, Mercouri, Papagiannakou, Papaioannou, Sigalas, Wine Art.

See [Greek Winemakers](#) for more information on this region.