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STEVEN SPURRIER

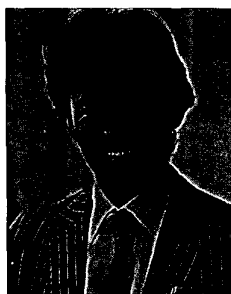
The Greek Revolution

The next fashionable wine region to capture the imagination and shelf space of the British wine buyers may well not be from the New World, but from the oldest wine-producing part of the Old World: Greece. A mixture of determination, imagination and money, both home-grown and from Brussels, has begun to create in Greece a viticultural landscape and spectrum of wines that has its roots in the past and its eyes on the future. The fact that most of these wines are made from indigenous, historic grape varieties, thus totally out of step with most other countries, makes what is now happening in Greece even more worthy of attention.

Chronicler of these changes is Corfu-born but British-educated Nico Manassis, whose *Greek Wine Guide* is now in its second edition. After a dozen years in the wine trade in France, California and New York, Manassis realised that, despite studied replanting and revolutionary progress in vineyard management and vinification, Greek wine was still firmly viewed as 'rotgut or Retsina' territory, and decided that a book was needed to describe the wines and the people who made them. The 1995 edition, the result of 23,000 kilometres and 600 nautical miles of travel with his photographer, Constantinos Pittas, shows a fascinating picture of ancient industry once more on the move.

The progressive devastation of Greek viticulture, caused by disappearing manpower through the Balkan Wars, two World Wars and a Civil War, the emptying of the countryside towards Athens – which now contains over half of the entire population – general emigration, and finally a late dose of phylloxera, was almost complete by the 1960s. Zitsa, in Epirus, with 6,000 hectares under vine in the 1900s, could boast of less than 100 in 1962; low-yield, high-quality mountainous vineyards had been abandoned in favour of plains, where table grapes or raisins were more profitable than winemaking. However, in 1965 the stunning 'amphitheatre' slopes at Domaine Carras on the Chalkidiki peninsula in Macedonia were replanted, trellised and meticulously cared for, and in 1967, forested slopes were cleared on the Boutari estate in Yannacochoi, to make way for the first model vineyards in Naoussa, a quality red wine region. Only in 1971 were early appellation laws introduced and then, 10 years later, when Greece joined what was then the European Economic Community, agricultural subsidies were suddenly available. Young Greek winemakers, returning home with oenology degrees from Bordeaux, Dijon or Montpellier, met these hand-outs head on, resulting in a rash of 'boutique' wineries, show-piece vineyards and a sudden redefinition of quality. The problem was, how to sell it?

Unlike France or Italy, Greece had no historically prestigious wines to give it an image to aspire to. Pre-revolution wines were so poor that a well-travelled friend of mine used to maintain that



John Walker

'the worst French wine is better than the best Greek wine'. Even the several thousand Greek *tavernas* around the globe are mostly still locked into the era of the Chianti flask, and one of the main aims of Maggie McNie MW of the Greek Wine Bureau is 'to get further than the ethnic market'. Consumption at home has fallen to under 30 litres per capita, stressing the need for an export market, and despite subsidies from the EU, unit costs from the low-yielding local grapes are high enough to price them right out of the profitable Vin de Pays market.

In the midst of this gloom, OINORAMA 1995, the second Greek Wine Fair, held in late February in a minuscule part of the cavernous Olympic Stadium, provided more than a chink of light. Not only did 90 per cent of growers and co-operatives participate in this trade-only exhibition, but the presence of the owners, managers and winemakers at the four-day event allowed the message of quality to get through. Tasting the platinum-pale 1994 white from 70-year-old non-grafted Assyrtico grapes grown on volcanic soil on the island of Santorini, the soft yet minerally Roditis whites with a hint of pear-drops from Thessalonika, the ripe, plummy Aghiorghitiko (also known as Saint George) reds, unique to Nemea in Corinth, or the Pinot-Noir-like Xynomavro from Naoussa and Goumenissa, one is struck by the distinctive personality of such wines, which owe nothing to overt fruitiness or concentration. What they, and other such wines, may lack in

obvious aroma, is more than made up for by unassertive flavour and persistence on the palate. Yannis Boutari insists this 'mouth-feel' and originality is Greek wine's strength.

A further driving force to be reckoned with is the financial muscle behind some of these wineries, whose owners have decided that making good wine is more satisfying, although less immediately profitable, than making rubbish. This not only refers to the current generation in charge of wine dynasties, such as Achaia Clauss (1861), J Boutari and Son (1879) or D Kourtakis (1895), but also to such newcomers as the visionary ship owner John Carras, who died in 1989, whose 450 hectares at Chateau Carras is the largest single private Domaine in Europe, or to Constantin Lazaridis, head of the company

that holds the world's largest stocks of marble, whose 55 hectare Amethystos vineyard, created with the idea of supplying good wine to his friends, will soon be producing 350,000 bottles. Finally, in Anne Kokotos, export director for her husband's Semeli Winery, Greece may soon have her first Master of Wine.

Nico Manassis's Greek Wine Guide is available from Olive Press, 30 Chemin des Chevres, CH 1292 Chambésy (fax: 00 41 22 758 0186), at £7.99. Suppliers of Greek Wine in the UK from the Greek Wine Bureau, 260A Fulham Road, London SW10 9EL (tel: 0171-823 3799).

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