

Sampling Ionian Wine Jars

Tourism may usually work at cross-purposes to agriculture on the Ionian Islands, but that certainly should not be so where wine is concerned. What could be more natural to the holidaymaker's condition than to dip into the wine jar at lunch and dinner while surveying sea or village square? But our imbibing does not do the Ionian grape-grower as much good as it should if we do not know what to seek in the way of native wine. In the second of a two-part introduction to the Ionian's wines, Miles Lambert-Gocs looks at some of the best of the region's reds and rosés.

The predominance of white wine notwithstanding, red and reddish wines have most definitely held on in the Ionians, especially in the folk culture, although this is more apparent in tourism's off-season, when cold air blows down from Homer's northern "gloom" and the menfolk go hunting small game.

The dark pride of the Ionians generally is the mavrodafni variety, which is more associated with Patras on the Peloponnese, but which in fact originated in the Ionians. The mavrodafni is especially typical of Ithaca and parts of Kefalonia. On its own, mavrodafni is usually grown to give a sweetish red wine that is matured in cask to a dryish potency and slightly brownish colour. A little mavrodafni of classic type is offered occasionally by Inoexagoyiki (Calligas) of Kefalonia. More usually now, the variety's role is to provide colour in blends of white wines destined for rosé wine, hence the Brillante rosé (mavrodafni with tsaousi, robola, and moskhato) from the Kefalonian cooperative and Calliga Rosé Demi-Sec (a similar blend but without robola).

A close relative of the mavrodafni is the thiniatiko, which is virtually exclusive to Kefalonia. The thiniatiko may not be as highly flavoured as its famous cousin, but for today's tastes it has the advantage of being better suited to giving dry wine all on its own. The light and savoury Ktima Calliga from Inoexagoyiki is matured only in stainless steel and bottle, for two years, and is worthy of further ageing in a home cellar. On Kefalonia, it is a wine to ask for when ordering the local speciality, meat pie (kreatopita kefalonitiki).

Avgoustiatis is the chief dark sort on Zakynthos, but it is usually vinified with other red or black grapes, especially katsakoulia. If the grapes are of black kind, fully red wines are obtained, whereas if they are of red kind, lightly red wines, usually called rosés today, are the result. The common feature of all the really good ones may be summed up by reference to an 1882 mention of a Zakynthian red wine as being like "a very soft Burgundy".

All avgoustiatis red wines are those from Koryianitis and Voultsos (Cava Callinico), which have two years of barrel ageing. Comoutos Rouge and Comoutos Rouge Grand Reserve are multi-varietal blends (avgoustiatis, katsakoulia, ayiomavritiko, etc.), with two years of barrel age for the former and three years in barrel and two in bottle for the latter. Solomos's red is Amoudi, a mix of avgoustiatis, katsakoulia, and stafidabelo which is given only six months in oak. A rosé wine of uncommon quality is Comoutos Rosé. Any of these wines are pleasurable with the two premier Zakynthian meat dishes, baby-beef saltsa and rabbit stifado.

Quite a few grape varieties in the Ionians have black, red, and white variants, and one of particular note is the kakotriyis of Corfu. As with white kakotriyis wines, one should seek the Ano Lefkimi red wines of Koulouris winery for youth and fragrance, and the Grovino red of Vasilakis in central Corfu for age and oak and even some finesse. Kakotriyis is joined with petrokoritho in Theotoki Roppa rosé. All of these wines promise the tourist hedonistic enjoyment with Corfu's meat-and-macaroni pastitsada.

The odd man out among Ionian grape varieties is the vertzami, which has been the mainstay of the Lefkadian vineyard for the past century-and-a-half because of its very dark colour that has made it sought-after as a wine for blending, either in France for red wines or in Greece for generic rosés made largely from surplus white wine. A dry vertzami wine under the Kefaliko label and a semi-dry one under the Santa Mavra label are offered by the cooperative of Lefkas. Far from having any ancient roots in the Ionians, the vertzami is the black marzemino brought from the north-eastern Italy by the Venetians.

Note: Not all bottled wines offered by Ionian producers are entirely Ionian products. Notable examples are: Nostos red from Inoexagoyiki, a mix of one-fifth mavrodafni of Kefalonia with four-fifths ayioriyitiko from Nemea (Peloponnese); and St. Denis red from the Zakynthos cooperative, a half-and-half blend of local avgoustiatis and Nemean ayioriyitiko.

Miles Lambert-Gocs is the author of The Wines of Greece (Faber & Faber, 1990). His book has been awarded by the Anglo-Hellenic League and the Wine Guild of the United Kingdom.

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