

Santorini Wines for the Easter Table

By Peter Csizmadia-Honigh

The prolonged chill of winter is finally being ushered out of Europe and North America alike, giving hope for sufficiently sunny and warm weather during the Orthodox Easter holidays. With that in mind, for Easter wine recommendations, I cast my eyes firmly on Santorini, one of the best-known islands of the Cyclades.

Relatively speaking, Santorini is a small island and primarily a tourist destination.



Yet, there is a thriving wine scene with ten noted producers crafting wines mostly from indigenous varieties. The isle being an extinct volcano, the soil is aspa—an infertile mix of lava and sand ideally suited for grape growing. This terroir lends a rich minerality to the wines, whilst meltemia, the prevailing northerly wind, furnishes them with freshness.

You may go traditional or modern when it comes to preparing your Easter meals, but you cannot afford to miss a bottle of Aidani. The local variety known for its dry, light, gently perfumed and crisp white wines, goes extremely well with salads, olives or feta, but I would equally savour it with tahinosoupa.

Hatzidakis Aidani 2012 was made from organically farmed grapes and relying purely on wild yeasts during fermentation. This wine is straw and lemon in colour with a slight haze. It has a nicely intense and zesty nose, with scents of pineapple, honey and a touch of lees character. It's dry and silky, richly textured and rounded; with flavours of rosewater and white pepper on the back-palate. It is a mouth-

watering delight.

Saturday's mayiritsa soup is a hearty meal even on its own. Therefore, it requires wines that stand up against it, without overwhelming. The extremely widely planted Assyrtiko, a white grape variety, is often fermented or matured in oak barrels. This results in weightier body making it an ideal match for this rich soup of lamb, dill, lemon and romaine.

Gaia Assyrtiko 2012 is a wild ferment too with 40% of the wine having been aged in barrels. It is light lemon in colour with a green hue. A highly intense nose with saw-dusty oak, the dry palate bursts with lemon zest and butter. Alternatively, I suggest a bottle of 2011 Argyros Estate Assyrtiko, Barrel Fermented, which is lemon in colour with a green hue, but then the nose is seduced with a rich mix of acacia, smoky and buttery tones before the lime juice hits us. A lovely dry, zesty wine with bright citrus fruit and a hint of salt, it has an excellent finish.

Lighter dishes, salads and cheeses can be easily paired with Assyrtiko, but I suggest choosing some of the lighter styles. To make the transition

from the more full-bodied whites, try the 2011 vintage of Hatzidakis Cuvee No. 15, which is a blend of Assyrtiko grapes grown in three different vineyards. It was fermented with wild yeasts and left on the fine lees for eight months, thus building a rich, but gentle body. It is golden with a straw hue, with very nicely ripe fruits of apple and pear on the palate. A touch of honey notes keeps the balance of this otherwise very dry and fresh wine.

Nykteri white wines were traditionally made from at least 75% Assyrtiko grapes harvested and crushed at night in order to keep the freshness. Hence the name from nikta, the Greek word for night. Today, Nykteri wines are not necessarily made during the night, but certainly they represent a lighter style with the dominance of salinity. Hatzidakis Nikteri 2009 is honey, camomile and acacia scented with a soft and rounded texture along a brilliant freshness. Domaine Sigalas Nychteri 2009 is fresh, but with a buttery, apple and almond flavoured, rich and oily palate. It has a lovely intense and long finish.

The festive Greek Easter



table would be nothing without lamb or goat. After all, it is the first time meat is allowed after weeks of fasting. This, of course, calls for red wine. Mavrotragano is an ancient black grape variety that was saved from extinction. Its typically heavy structure and black fruits make it the prime contender to be enjoyed with meat.

Argyros Estate Mavrotragano 2010 is dark crimson with a highly intense nose of ripe sour-cherry and strawberries, spiced with liquorice and pine kernels. Dry and fresh, it is very tannic with an excellent concentration. The cocoa and clove tones add an extra dimension to the palate. No wonder, as it was aged in barrel for a year.

Another lovely example is Domaine Sigalas Mavrotraga-

no 2010, which is dark purple in colour and leaner in style. The very ripe sour-cherries are complemented by minty tones and liquorice. Densely knit tannins and a lovely concentration before the long finish. Both wines will benefit from decanting them for 60-to-90 minutes before drinking.

For the final course of either dessert or cheese, Vinsanto, a wine made from grapes dried in the sun for 10 days before pressing, is a good match. The result is a natural concentration of flavours and an exuberant sweetness often tamed by long years of barrel maturation.

Santo Wines' Vinsanto 2004 is lighter garnet with olive and orange on the rim. It's extremely intensely scented with almonds, walnuts and raisin. A

hint of orange and green olives lend it complexity, delicately structured with a silky mouth-feel.

Vinsanto wines can be aged in cask almost indefinitely before bottling; it is winemaker's choice. Argyros Wines produce a range from 4-to-20 years old in age. Their 20-year old Argyros Vinsanto (vintage 1990) is superb.

With pronounced garnet and an olive rim, it is extravagantly intense with dried mushrooms, orange peel and nutty character. It is very sweet, the tannins are nicely mellow and the finish is extremely long. It's a true celebration of what Vinsanto can achieve at its best.

These wines can be easily sourced in the USA through merchants such as Diamond Importers in Chicago, Frederick Wildman & Sons in New York, Athenee Importers in

New York or Mani Imports in Sacramento, Calif. Raise your glass with Santorini wines this Greek Easter. Cheers.

Editor's note: Peter Csizmadia-Honigh is a Hungarian transplant living and working in London, UK. His day-time job keeps him busy with the management of a global wine education program, whilst he dedicates his free time to wine writing and winegrowing. Peter regularly writes for VinCE, the largest wine magazine in Hungary, and Sommelier India. As co-proprietor of Royal Somló Vineyards in Western Hungary, he crafts wines for Michelin-star restaurants in London, Amsterdam and Budapest, from Juhfark, an indigenous Hungarian variety.

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