

— Author & Photographer
Sally Wilson

— Location
Greece

Greek Wine's Eureka Moment

Greece has a long history of wine production and yet the indigenous varieties are seldom treated with the respect of their French, Italian and Spanish counterparts. Touring the country's diverse landscape, Sally Wilson introduces us to a couple of wines worth discovering.

“We drink a litre of wine with every meal,” my taxi driver says on the way to Eleftherios Venizelos International Airport, Athens. I look at my phone. 9:30 AM.

“With lunch and dinner,” he says, correcting himself. For a moment at least I try to visualise how wine might fair with a large serve of breakfast spanakopita, a slice of cheese and fried eggs. After five days in Greece it doesn’t seem beyond the realm of possibility and, to be honest, I’m encouraged by this man, his sense of direction and my limitless luck in plucking only the best raconteur taxi drivers from thousands in the capital.

“We drink too much wine,” he sighs, concluding his three-line ode with eyes on the road, hands on the wheel and an appropriate pause followed by laughter. It’s an admission, mixed with a bundle of regret, then tossed in the pan like a triangle of saganaki and left to sizzle. “Not enough wine by half,” is the way I interpret it.

Which is perhaps the only way to interpret it, given the quality of light in this country, the songs playing on the radio and the look of complete satisfaction on this man’s face as he hits the A6 motorway, Attiki Odos, at a pace. My simple wish is that he’d drive slower, since I have my own regrets in leaving Athens.

Each litre of wine consumed by my taxi driver comes from the Peloponnese, the southern-most tip of mainland Greece. Here his family owns land, grows grapes and makes wine for their table. “Everyone outside of Athens does it this way and has done for a long time,” he explains, exercising the narrator’s right to a ten per cent buffer between romantic exaggeration and the truth.

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Disclaimer: Sally Wilsons’s travel and accommodation was paid for by the European Union via their initiative supporting the wines of Amydeon and Florina.

“We have 5,000 years of winemaking history in Greece. So, how can you say ‘French wine’ or ‘Italian wine’ without saying ‘Greek wine’?” As we pull up outside the airport this is his parting question to me, issued one hundred per cent in the rhetorical. I continue thinking about it as the plane arches up, offering a pilot’s view of the vineyards of Attica and, onwards, the Aegean Sea.

My new friend is right to ask. We can find all the wines of Italy, France and Spain in Australia, but when it comes to Greece there’s a scarcity. We’ve taken souvlakis, dolmades and tzatziki as our own, but at some point waved off the wine. “Why?” I ask, tightening my seatbelt before take-off and, concurrently, promising all future savings towards travel in Greece or, at least in the short-term, to the food and wine at restaurants owned by George Calombaris.

“Greek wine tastes good on holiday, but doesn’t translate outside of Greece,” is the way it was explained to me in bottle shops ahead of this ambitious, week-long tour to northern Greece, Attica and Crete. Upon touch down, no-one seemed to dodge the question, but swatted it off with practiced tolerance. “Twenty years ago Greek wine was undrinkable,” Lambros Papadimitriou of pioneering winery, *Kir-Yianni*, told me early on. “Now it has improved and should be shown internationally.”

Region: Epanomi, a PGI within Macedonia

Coordinates: 40°26’N 22°56’E

Influences: Mediterranean climate with breezes from the Thermaic Gulf; sandy clay soils with marine fossils

Grape to know: Malagousia (white)

Winemaker Vangelis Gerovassiliou is the one who takes the bull by the horns, opens the door to his truck and waits a moment while I jump in.

Few operate with a surer hand than the Epanomi-born, Bordeaux-trained oenologist. He is the worldly type who can experiment and succeed on first attempt, whether that involves reviving a near-extinct variety of indigenous grape, planting a model 350-acre organic vineyard in the middle of tobacco country, or building an underground museum for his expanding collection of antique corkscrews (2,600 at last count). I instinctively trust him when he pours wine into my glass at *Ktima Gerovassiliou*, just outside of Thessaloniki.

Malagousia is Vangelis’ pet grape. In the early 1980s, he plucked the native white variety from the jaws of extinction and planted it across the family vineyard in Epanomi. The plants thrived in the sandy clay soils and warm climate, helped along by cooling breezes flowing in from the Thermaic Gulf. Standing between the vines, which soar hungrily above head height, I have the impression of being watched, or rather that every move here is witnessed, consented to, or otherwise invisibly blocked. That’s when Vangelis points out Mount Olympus in the distance.

Call it an oenologist’s vision, call it the wilful hand of Zeus reaching down from the mountain top, but malagousia has certainly found its home. At *Ktima Gerovassiliou*, it’s presented two ways: as a single vineyard release (2015) and within the estate white (2015), a 50/50 blend with assyrtiko (another native grape grown onsite). Both are aromatic, weekend wines with green capsicum, citrus, friendly acidity and roundness to taste. In my notes I scribble that the blend is ‘an inhalation of sea air and all its riches’.

Vangelis suggests lunch at Potamos beach, not far off if we take the truck. Fifteen minutes later we’re set up in front of a salt-ravaged taverna approximating paradise. There’s the drowsy smell of a half lemon being used to clean a grill, a pyramid of scaled fish balancing a knife, and a five-step commute to the sea’s edge, which I can just make out through the pile-up of blue and white-striped beach umbrellas.



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Above
Ktima Gerovassiliou, Epanomi

The taverna provides shade from the sun, music from a tape deck, endless plates of Greek salad, feta on the side, and aluminium takeaway containers loaded with hot chips. Hot chips that crunch and melt when bitten, that store oregano, olive oil and salt in their very cellular structures. Steamed parcels of fish with more potato, eggplant, olives and spinach arrive. Ktima *Biblia Chora* 2015 rosé descends from a magnum. This smart drink, pink as my nose, made from 100% syrah grapes comes from Vangelis' organic estate, co-owned with winemaker Vassilis Tsaktsarlis. Then there is ouzo, whether I need it or not.

The syrah-based rosé is a complete hit. But I start to think that the real power of new Greek wines is the abundance of native grape varieties, and the renewed belief winemakers have in them. All told there are 300 indigenous varieties, accounting for 90 per cent of those in cultivation across the country. Around eighty native varieties are currently used for wines. The four wine grapes most widely grown are savatiano, roditis, agiorgitiko and xinomavro, in that order. Names like these need to be practiced but, after a few tries, roll off the tongue in a very satisfying way.

Region: Naoussa, a PDO within Macedonia

Coordinates: 40°38'N 22°4'E

Influences: Sloping topography due to Mount Vermio, with altitudes from 150-450 metres; varying soils types

Grape to know: Xinomavro (red)



Take xinomavro. Ksee no' ma vro. It's Greek for "acid black". Typically, these grapes convert into dry red wines, with tannins that start at playful and escalate to blistering. "Should we make xinomavro more accessible?" asks *Kir-Yianni's* Lambros Papadimitriou when I'm six-deep in tastings of the estate's 2011 single vineyard releases at their 55-hectare property in Naoussa, 100 kilometres west of Thessaloniki. I pause to reflect, but Lambros forges on. "We can strip back the tannins, we can blend it with grapes like syrah, but ultimately at Kir-Yianni we want to make big wines that last." The 2012 *Ramnista* is a well-balanced example, with tea leaves and tomato on the nose, cherry in the mouth and slow-cooked lamb a vivid mirage—dancing just a fork's length off.

Kir-Yianni is a leader in the contemporary Greek wine scene, with an equal place historically. Its founder, seventy-four-year-old Yiannis Boutaris, spent fifty years as a winemaker, got his gold watch and promptly entered politics. The past five years he's served as Thessaloniki's mayor. For one month in 2012 he held the official title of 'Best Mayor in the World' (a baton that was not lost, but is apparently passed between best mayors monthly). He also founded an animal welfare sanctuary in Naoussa for endangered brown bears. Yiannis is a household name in Greece and from one of the country's original winemaking dynasties. Today, his son Stelios Boutaris leads Kir-Yianni. Stelios is fifth generation; winemaking undeniably in his blood.

The bulk of Kir-Yianni's xinomavro is produced in Naoussa. The area is mountainous, fertile and in winter covered in snow and skiers. But driving through in summer the roadsides are a blur of peach, nectarine and cherry orchards, and grapes expanding towards harvest. As an appellation, Naoussa is entirely dedicated to xinomavro and local producers are understandably serious about their grape. On winemaker's night at the Palaia Poli Hotel in downtown Naoussa, I'm able to meet a good number of them. And through the throng of tannins, trestle tables and half-full glasses is Apostolos Thymiopoulos, lit up like an angel by the fluorescent lamps of the hotel dining hall. His *Young Vines* xinomavros from the family's biodynamic vineyard are fantastic drinking wines if you can find them. The 2015 vintage has a blackcurrant nose, leading to cherries and an assertive level of grip. The 2014 vintage is as approachable, with just-ripe raspberries and nice warmth between visits, all despite a hard harvest struck by hail. Its cellaring potential is "six years, maybe more" says the young winemaker, applying a relaxed, wait-and-see approach.

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Above
Kir-Yanni

Region: Amynteo, a PDO within Macedonia

Coordinates: 40°41'N 21°41'E

Influences: Gentle topography set on a high plateau, with altitudes from 570-750 metres; year-round, northerly breezes and the cooling influence of lakes Petron and Vergoritida; sandy soils; coldest winemaking region in Greece

Grape to know: Xinomavro (red); rosé and sparkling wines also feature



The versatility of a grape like xinomavro hits me the next day in Amynteo, an hour further west. Xinomavro plays as dominant a role here as in neighbouring Naoussa, but in ways you may not expect from the dusty red. High on the top of Samaropetra—or 'Saddle Rock'—is Kir-Yianni's second vineyard. Lambros hands me a glass of sparkling, made from 2013's local xinomavro harvest in the méthode champenoise. It's an as yet unreleased and unnamed work, he tells me, freshly disgorged for the occasion. The wind rushes through the blonde grass; the wine blushes on my behalf. I mean it really blushes. It's apricot pink, sun-bleached, the alter-ego of a bone dry xinomavro. Perhaps the only clue to the wine's identity is the fact we're deep in xino-country. I feel compelled to raise my glass, under the influence of the altitude, the landscape, the bubbles.

Surprises continue at *Domaine Karanika*, located on the alluvial flats below. A pack of dogs starts up as I approach the winery and owners Laurens Hartman and Annette van Kampen emerge to quieten them. They are a publishing couple, originally from the Netherlands, who moved to Amynteo in pursuit of the xinomavro dream. Over time they patched together enough land to start a winery, which they now run according to organic principles.

Amynteo may be Greece's coldest wine region but it feels like the hottest today. Annette brings cheese to the table. Within two minutes it's broken into a sweat. Laurens pops the cork from a frosty bottle of their xinomavro *Blanc de Noir* (2015) to retaliate, however temporary the relief. "This is a compact 'Champagne' without the price tag," he says, delivering a free thought bubble with the pour.

But xinomavro in sparkling format deserves more praise than that. It's sharp, all lemon sorbet and accuracy. It could probably do a tax return for you, or help with celebrations at the end of it. Another surprise is the xinomavro-meets-limniona red blend (2015). This collision of uncompromising and fruity makes me want to dial for—of all things—pizza in the northern highlands of Greece. Aristotle first noted limniona growing on the island of Lemnos in ancient times, but the grape seems just as happy here in Amynteo, keeping company with xinomavro on field and in the bottle.

According to legend, the god of all gods, Zeus, was born in Crete. So was Nikos Douloufakis. It's Nikos' birthday when I arrive in his hometown of Daphnes from Athens, but that fact he keeps secret until we're seated for dinner in the town square with eighty townsfolk, a three-piece band, and two dozen traditional dancers a few hours later. For now, I'm in the back of his truck—the back, back—bouncing vertebrae by vertebrae along dirt roads to his vineyards, enjoying the view.

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Above
Domaine Karanika

Region: Daphnes, a PDO within Crete

Coordinates: 35°19'N 25°05'E

Influences: Mountainous topography, at 350 metres above sea level; generally hot climate with cooler, micro-climates; clay and limestone soils

Grapes to know: Liatiko (red) and vidiano (white)

As we drive, olive trees, vines and vegetables roll past like a flip book of productivity. It seems to me a miracle, this limestone scenery that offers no shade, no extras, and affords no superficiality. The light falling on the land has the quality of a Super-8, at once nostalgic, fleeting and eternal.

When Henry Miller was in Crete in the late 1930s, he wrote that: "Life is at the roots, embedded in simplicity, asserting itself uniquely." The statement makes perfect sense as Nikos moves through the vineyards, checking vines and picking a grape or two. It makes sense again when he pours a glass of white back at the cellar door in Daphnes.

"This is vidiano, a local grape" Nikos starts by saying, holding his glass on a tilt and scrutinising it. "In my view, it's the best variety in Crete and now also one of the best in Greece." The 2015 vintage offers apricot and peach flavours with a nice show of acidity. "For me, vidiano is best when it's 1-2 years old," he says, moving onto the single vineyard, barrel-fermented 'Aspros Lagos' vidiano (2015). It is, I write in my notes, "ace." After a moment's reflection I add a smile by way of emphasis.

Nikos collects a half dozen of the open bottles from the table and we head to into town for food, more wine and a bit of dancing. When I say food, I mean an unwritten three-page menu of heartfelt proportions. When I say wine, I don't mean what's limited to the liquid in a bottle but a whole sentiment that rises up from the land and finds its expression in people working with grapes. When I say dancing, I mean teenagers flying in traditional attire to the heroic rhythm of string instruments. Their mums follow, dancing the same, traditional dances in their denim jeans, platform sandals and maxi dresses. This is the New World versus the Old World, in wines as in life.

Plates of mini-cigar sized dolmades appear from a kitchen visible just beyond the lights of the town square. Tzatziki, green salad and bowls of yellow split pea dip follow. Thick omelettes of potato and zucchini. A slow-cooked goat stew giddy with in-season tomatoes. Plates of bare spaghetti. Taking the lead from Nikos I cover a serve of pasta with tomato sauce from the stew and top it with pieces of goat. The dish becomes a revelation. So are the golden, fried potatoes.

Liatiko is the PDO red in Daphnes. This is handy because it's a natural match for tonight's main course of spit-roasted lamb. I help myself to a decent glass of the Dafnios 2013 vintage and battle on. The wine is ripe, strappy, suggestive of blackberries and Kalamata olives. Dessert is birthday cake, melon and warm ricotta pastries dusted with cinnamon and icing sugar. Nikos pours aniseed-flavoured raki for the table and the evening well and truly begins. I take a sweet wine when it's offered (2005 Helios). This is liatiko, turned by the sun and six years in the barrel into a mouthful of crème brûlée and toffee.

By this stage the moon is a waxing half crescent. I catch a sight of Nikos, perched and smiling at head of the table.

Other Greek Wines to Discover

Christos Zafeirakis is making beautiful, organic wines at Domaine Zafeirakis in Thessaly, near the foothills of Mount Olympus. With the Zafeirakis Chardonnay, Christos gives the grape an astonishing make-over, resulting in a wine with riesling-like acidity and flavours of lemon curd. All across Greece winemakers are producing impressive rosé wines, but the Zafeirakis Rosé from local limniona grapes is a stand-out, with aromas of sherbet and minerality in the mouth. Rare limniona is definitely the break-out grape for Christos, and one of his most considered wines (from a comprehensive list) is the Zafeirakis Limniona. "I came to better understand the soil in my vineyard, and limniona as a varietal, by making this wine," he says. "It's my choice not to make the wine loud and alcoholic, but to keep it subtle." Yes, the wine is gentle, silky and reminiscent of a fine pinot noir—much like the man himself.



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Above
Cretan Dancing

Region: Attiki, central Greece; 40 kilometres south-east of Athens

Coordinates: 37°89'N 23°98'E

Influences: Aegean Sea, with Etesian winds; sandy clay soils; undulating topography; Mediterranean climate with very low rainfall

Grapes to know: Savatiano, roditis (white); agiorgitiko (red)



Gaia Wines was founded by odd-couple Leon Karatsalos, an agronomist, and larger-than-life oenologist, Yiannis Paraskevopoulos. They make fantastic wines and invest in experimentation, process and refinement. Try their Thalassitis Assyrtiko Wild Ferment white (2015) from Santorini. "Assyrtiko is the most terroir-driven wine on the planet," says Yiannis with typical candour. The combination of volcanic soils and the salinity of their island estate, where sea spray literally jumps up and hits the vines, boosts the mineral characters of the wine, he says. "Greek sommeliers love to have a Santorini assyrtiko on their list because when there isn't a perfect match for wine and food, assyrtiko will do the job nicely." Their other key grape is Greek wine's biggest tongue-twister: agiorgitiko (ah yor yee' ti ko). The Agiorgitiko by Gaia (2013) from Nemea in the Peloponnese offers cherry, liquorice and a structured lashing of tannins and spice. "The grapes are one hundred per cent estate grown, so we only produce the wine from year to year if we're happy with the fruit," says Yiannis. By all accounts, 2013 was a good year.

"Philoxenia," Vassilis Papagiannakos tells me, "is the ancient Greek concept of hospitality shown to travellers." We're driving from his winery in Attika to lunch on the coast at Porto Rafti and I jump at the chance to see some of his old vines on the way. Out here on the plains surrounding Athens there are 320 days of sunshine. I'm lucky to have stumbled upon one of them.

The old vines are 60-year old bush plantings of savatiano, the country's most widely grown wine grape. It's also the grape most likely responsible for a slew of preconceptions about Greek wine: sweetness, retsina, undrinkability. "My father and grandfather both harvested savatiano over-ripe, in the traditional way," explains Vassilis, towering over one of the knotted grapevines that stops around his hip height. "This produced a sweeter wine, which was then diluted in the glass. Now harvest is earlier, and cooled fermentation better reveals the aromatics of the grape."

Domaine Papagiannakis' 2015 'Old Vines' savatiano has honey dew, lemon zest and medium acidity. You certainly couldn't criticise it for being overtly sweet. Even more interesting is the way the wine bottle ages, bringing quick and dramatic changes. Aromas of bacon and grilled parmesan characterise the 2012 'Old Vines' reserve and camembert and roasted nuts surface in the reserve from 2008. 'Vareli' is a barrel-aged savatiano (2015), showing the grape does well with a little time in oak. Here, smoked almonds are the segue to tinned peaches and, if you've played your cards right, a plate of hard cheese, bread sticks and local black figs.

Philoxenia is on show all over Greece. It's on show as Vassilis escorts me around the vineyards he's walked a million times. It's on show as we pull up to a seaside restaurant in Porto Rafti, where four, giant, fresh-caught octopus are strung out to dry on a single clothesline under the influence of the Etesian winds blowing in off the deep blue, Greek blue, Aegean. I get the feeling that there is a Eureka moment stirring, rushing through the vineyards, settling in the grapes. It's a moment of clarity that local winemakers are translating into the bottle and, via the steady hand of a waiter, one that has just arrived at our table.

I eat, I drink, I dive into the sea to thank whoever is responsible for Greece. A

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Above
Domaine Papagiannakis