

Alpha Estate

Amyndeon, Greece

BRUCE SCHOENFELD



WINEMAKER ANGELOS IATRIDIS IS MORE A BAKER THAN A COOK.

The wine and spirits editor of Travel + Leisure magazine, Bruce Schoenfeld is a former contributing editor of Wine Spectator who has also written for Gourmet, GQ, The New York Times Magazine, Atlantic Monthly, and many other publications. He has received two Emmy Awards for television writing, and his most recent book, The Match: Althea Gibson & Angela Buxton, was published by HarperCollins/Amistad. He lives in Colorado.

The Iatridis family pastry shop rests on a steeply pitched section of St. Sofia Street in Thessaloniki, Greece. Glass display cases show off cakes and chocolates. “My great-grandfather started this in Istanbul at the end of the 1800s,” explained Angelos Iatridis on my recent visit. “My brother runs it now.”

Not only isn't Iatridis involved in the pastry shop, he rarely even has time to visit. Early each weekday morning, and on many weekends too, he drives west an hour and a half through the countryside to Amyndeon, the country's coolest viticultural region—and one that until recently was devoid of wineries but for a single cooperative. Not far from the national borders with Macedonia and Albania, he spends most of

the day obsessing over some of the most neatly manicured vineyards I've ever encountered: the high-altitude plantings on sandy soils that constitute Alpha Estate, one of the foremost wineries in Greece's new wave.

I found Iatridis there, gazing intently at the vineyard canopy under the summer sun. “We don't buy a single grape,” he told me. “We want to control every aspect of what we do, from the planting of the vines on through to the wine making. I admit it: I'm a control freak.”

As it turns out, Iatridis, 45, isn't that removed from the family business. Where many winemakers operate like cooks, fermenting grape juice with the same freewheeling sensibility that one might use to create an

WINERY SPOTLIGHT



Winemaker Angelos Iatridis (left); the Alpha Estate winery in winter (above).

hoc meal, Iatridis concocts his cuvées with the meticulousness of a baker. “I’m not an artist, that’s for sure,” he insisted.

To Iatridis, grape growing and winemaking are scientific acts that yield predictable results, insofar as variables can be eliminated. Accordingly, he devotes hour after hour to identifying—and eliminating—as many as he can. He believes most variables are likely to occur outside the winery, which in this case is a handsome, technologically driven, 7-year-old structure topped with barrel tiles and rimmed by cypresses. “It’s crucial to me to know what is happening in the vineyard, and what is going to happen,” Iatridis emphasized. “The biggest problem with Greece is that nobody is out really working the land, really understanding what they’re doing.”

Iatridis understands. Then he reacts with alacrity. When soil readings indicate that more water is needed, he enables his high-tech regulated-deficit irrigation system and parcels out just enough through subterranean pipes. “First system of its kind in Europe,” he boasted. When the temperature in his tanks rises even a tenth of a degree, he can mitigate it through his computerized cooling system, whether he’s in

the winery, at home in Thessaloniki, or in transit between the two (using his iPhone).

Some of Alpha Estate’s Xinomavro vines are 80 years old, but whether the late-ripening native variety will still be the local signature grape a decade from now is, in Iatridis’s view, an open question. Syrah has already become a favorite in Amyndeon, a region that is just finding its viticultural footing. Along with Syrah, Iatridis has planted immaculate rows of Barbera and Negro Amaro, Nebbiolo and Montepulciano, as well as Tannat, Merlot, and indigenous varieties like Mavrodafne. “We are in the process of finding out exactly what grows best in this unique place and climate,” he said. “Why guess?”

Iatridis and his partners waited almost 10 years after their initial planting in 1994 to start making wine. Commercial production began with the 2003 vintage. Volume has increased to 24,000 cases, yet Iatridis still monitors his wines with the intense vigilance that parents show toward their newborns. OenoFoss machines display accurate alcohol readings within moments. “We’re one of the few wineries in the world using those,” said Iatridis. “People want the myth. But winemaking is chemistry, not myth. This is science. That’s how you make wine.”

ALPHA ESTATE
ΚΤΗΜΑ ΑΛΦΑ

Alpha Estate
2nd klm Amyndeon
Ag. Panteleimon
53200 Amyndeon
Greece
+30-23860-20111
www.alpha-estate.com
Importer: Diamond Importers
www.diamondwineimporters.com



Alpha Estate workers at harvest.

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Sauvignon Blanc Fumé 2009 \$17

A satiny mouthfeel from four months of *sur lie* aging surrounds copious green-melon and lime flavors. Textured, muscular, and long, it's not an easy wine to pigeonhole.

Alpha One 2007 \$50

This Montepulciano-Negro Amaro blend perplexes at first. A splash of acidity and spice helps give it a sense of place, and the rich, blackberry flavors are ultimately appealing. Needs time.

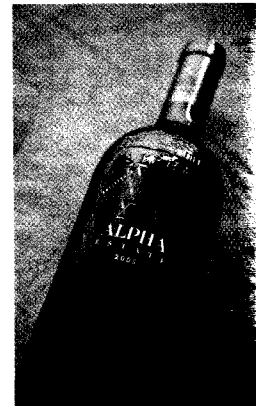
Red 2007 \$35

The Syrah, more spice than *garrigue*, is enhanced by a lovely frame of oak and cherry flavors from 20% Merlot and 20% Xinomavro. A polished, intriguing wine.

Xinomavro Reserve Vieilles Vignes 2007 \$30

This wine balances an Old World grip reminiscent of Nebbiolo with the ripeness of a Russian River Pinot Noir, while transmitting a personality that's all Greek. The extended finish hints at years of evolution ahead.

Prices are current estimated retail.



Harvesting old-vine Xinomavro at Alpha Estate (left).

I'd tried some Alpha Estate bottlings before and enjoyed them. They seemed to have a refinement, even a beauty, that I don't often find in Greek wine. But after an hour in the company of this most intensely logical of men, I was scared to taste his wines. I feared that what he

was about to serve me would bear the same relationship to great winemaking that painting by numbers does to fine art. The details would all be there, in perfect position and proportion. But they would somehow lack soul.

From the first sample, a *sur lie* Sauvignon Blanc, it was clear that I needn't have worried. This wine had a muscularity that I seldom find in Sauvignon Blancs, balanced by

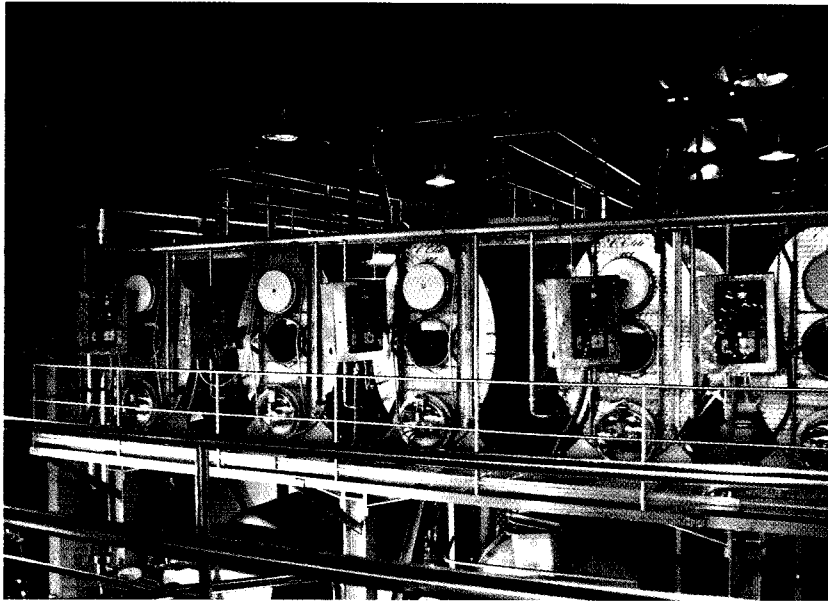
a splash of tangy lime. An Allier-aged Xinomavro avoided the grape's typical bitterness on the back of the palate. "Real ripeness," said Iatridis. I tasted the same in his red blend, which integrated Syrah, Merlot, and Xinomavro—three varieties I'd hesitate to invite to the same party, let alone put in the same glass—so seamlessly that I'd venture to call it elegant.

And those experimental wines were more than novelties. Gewürztraminer with Malagousia, Tannat with Xinomavro, a varietal Negro Amaro, a Mavrodafne-Barbera blend—all exhibited a reason for existence, which is more than most out-of-place varieties show around the world. It's also more than can be divined by logic alone. "Some of this you can figure out by soil type and sunlight exposure," Iatridis said. "But a certain amount of it is, 'Let's see what happens.'"



Alpha Estate cellar.

Alpha Estate winery.



Could the scientist have a poet's spirit after all? That's what I wondered when we reconvened in Xino Nero for dinner at Kontosoros, which Iatridis pronounced his favorite restaurant in Greece. We ate an asparagus risotto that wouldn't have been out of place in Milan, a pork tenderloin with traditional *frumenty* made from wheat and yogurt, and a singular stewed rabbit with cinnamon pasta. The Alpha Estate wines fit right in. We sampled the Sauvignon Blanc, a classic Greek Xinomavro, and a red blend that was all Iatridis. Together, the food and wine could be understood as an innovative take on northern Greek tradition. Or as a terrifically enjoyable dinner worthy of any place in the world.

I couldn't resist the pastries that were pressed upon us as we were leaving, but Iatridis demurred. "I have access to the best," he said. ☞