

TED Diamantis: Importer of Greek wine in the US

ALEXANDRA TZAVELLA



Early in the 1990s, Ted Diamantis, a son of Greek immigrants in Chicago, who originated from Mount Gortynia and Kimolos, made a decision that he reminded him of, as he recalls, crazy: "I saw Greek wine seriously ". The company importing Greek wine Diamond Wine Importers, which it founded 26 years ago, has grown to one of the largest in the US and is now considered one of the most important ambassadors for Greek wine in America.

What was the reason for entering the world of wine? What charmed you?

It was a trip that I made to Greece in the late 1980s. I had completed my studies, worked in insurance companies and struggled unbearably. I had been sucked by the American way of life, I had 12 years to return to Athens and I needed a break. Seeking new market trends, I traveled to Europe to import Greek products. When I came to Greece, I happened to meet the winemaker Giorgos Skouras and I felt the click was in me. He slowly introduced me to the Greek wine and to a new way of life that fascinated me. I believed in Greece, in its history, in the cultivation of its vineyards and that its unique historical varieties have a substance. I saw an opportunity in front of me. A few years later, I founded my own company. Greeks and Americans told me I was crazy,

Was the US wine scene then developed?

No, it was not. When I first started, the per capita consumption in the US was close to 9 liters per year, while in Europe at the same time it was 45 liters. I remember the Americans forcing me out of their shops. I just said that wine was Greek, they showed me the door: "Go and sell them to the Greeks." In Chicago there were a myriad of Greek shops and restaurants. The Greek wine, however, had no reputation and the Greeks did not support it. It was a foreign sector in the lifestyle of Greek Americans. Most people drink whatever you can imagine. When I was going to sell wines, they usually told me that "they are expensive" or "when they ask us, we will get them," and I replied, "But that's like waiting for you to get a phone without a device." I quickly learned that if I want to get up, I need to know what I'm saying. I started to work in the harvest in Nemea, with Skoura master, to learn the competition. In the early years I worked as a bartender and as a manager in a restaurant to get over it, and for three years I did courses and blind trials with wines from all over the world. I faced the wine market as an American, I played on my own terms.

Why is the American wine market difficult? Are the criteria financially or qualitatively?

It is a complex and multilevel market and especially the wine market would say that it is very competitive. Every remarkable label from around the world is in the US and, of course, there is also domestic production. So when you enter the American wine-growing arena, you are not just competing with your compatriots, but also labels from all over the world. If you do not have the money and strategy, if you do not know the profile of the client you are targeting, and if you have no solid presence and persistence, you may have a serious problem. There is a legitimate hierarchy in the American alcoholic beverage industry: there are many levels of importers, distributors and shopkeepers going through until a bottle of wine reaches the consumer's hand. The icing on the cake is the various taxes that affect its price. A \$ 5-pound bottle is sold on the shelf for \$ 21-22 and a restaurant's \$ 43-45 wine list. In addition, in the US you can not talk about a consumer but a consumer. What chooses to drink a portion of consumers in New York can not be wanted in Arizona.

What is most important for promoting Greek wine? Put it on the shelf or be included on the wine list of a good restaurant?

In the US, about 75% of the wines are sold to the cellars. However, 80% of Greek wine is sold in restaurants and does not reach the shelf. It's harder to get into the supermarket or cellar, where the shopkeeper has to make room, with the risk of keeping wine on the shelf. When I go to sell, I always pay attention to the point of the store where it will be placed. When the storekeeper tells me "I have no part with Greek wines, I will put it back there" and shows me a shelf beside the Japanese sake or the Bulgarian wines, I refuse to sell it. And, of course, I'm going crazy. I want Greek wine to come along with the rest of the Mediterranean, with Italian and Spanish, not to keep the bottles dusty and unsold. Old, I was joking about when the shopkeepers were asking me to buy a white one. I now want to see at least three different Greek white and at least three red in each store. We all want to know that Greece does not

have a good wine, but a lot. We are battling not to put Greek labels in the general category "other white" or "other red".

Which varieties are the most popular varieties in the United States?

Right now, the white ones are mainly Asyrtiko (especially from Santorini), Moschofilero, Vidianos, Malagousia. From the red, Xinomavro, Agiorgitiko, Liatiko. All of this, of course, is constantly changing. We work hard to make other varieties such as Savvatiano, Mavrotragano, Robola ...

What distinguishes Greek wines that could compete with other wines, such as Italian or even Californian?

The varieties are unique. The ecosystem and the terroir also. Greece has vineyards at many different altitudes; others in mountains, others near the sea. Greek wine has an excellent value for money and, most importantly, it has history, the best that can be said in the world of wine, and the new generation, millennials and hipsters are eager to hear it. We have the best specifications. We should not turn to low prices - there is no possibility of such a large production and we will not be competitive. Most Greek wines on the shelf cost from \$ 14 to \$ 18. The future of Greek wine is not at a low price, it is in high quality.

The latest trends in the world wine market?

I'm sorry for the trends. We do not hunt them. Whoever drives the tendencies loses. Market forces that must be taken into account by new producers are natural cultivation, clean organic farming, non-interventional winemaking and local varieties, wines that represent their place. These will be of concern to us in the years to come.