Variations on a Theme of Santorini

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by Tara Q. Thomas

"When I was young, all of Santorini was a vineyard—the vines reached nearly all the way to the top of the caldera," says Paris Sigalas. We're sitting in the tasting room of Sigalas's winery in Baxedes drinking his Assyrtiko–Athiri, a bright, floral, unusually tame take on Santorini's signature white. The blend, he finds, "makes the sort of wine you can drink all day long."

That would be an extreme sport with most Santorini...

◀ A view of the town of Oia, looking south

Paris Sigalas

Vines trained in traditional *kouloura*

Santorini is technically a desert, and the vines live almost solely on what they can pull from the air.

Built on assyrtiko, these are whites that winemakers here prefer to drink like a red, often pairing their Santorini with lamb. It is a fabulous combination, the wine's lemony acidity cutting easily into a gamey hunk of meat, especially if it's sauced in a creamy egg-and-lemon *avgolemono.* Great Santorini wines are elegant but brawny—more akin to Chassagne-Montrachet than to light, easy Vinho Verdes.

But, it turns out, that's just one side of Santorini. In the last 20 years, winemakers have had to work quickly to save the island's vineyards, which were being grubbed up to make way for tourist developments at the rate of five percent a year. Along the way, they established assyrtiko as its signature. Now that the vineyards are commercially viable, they are taking a closer look at their vines, examining how they might best realize the island's potential. It's that question that brings me to the island during a chilly week in May.

"In general, soil is not the big difference from place to place on Santorini," Sigalas says as we walk through a vineyard of athiri near the winery. The remains of a volcano that blew apart nearly 3,600 years ago, this long, crescent-shaped island is paved in ash, save for a bare spot at the highest point; in places, the layer reaches 40 feet deep. It makes the landscape look more like the pockmarked, barren surface of the moon than a Mediterranean island.

"As far as soil goes, where assyrtiko can go, so can athiri. But athiri needs more wind—the grapes are very sensitive to botrytis." From here the ocean isn't far away, and its proximity is palpable in an intensely saline humidity. "This is what the vines drink," Sigalas says, gesturing toward the sky. Santorini is technically a desert, and the vines live almost solely on what they can pull from the air.

To counter the humidity and catch more breezes, Sigalas trellised this vineyard, rather than training the vines in the traditional *kouloura,* the basket shape that keeps the vines safe from the island's harsh winds and shades the grapes from the burning sun. Trellising isn't possible everywhere on the island—chances are that higher up, the wind would rip the vines to pieces. Here, however, the winds are gentler, buffered by a slope that rises 1,000 feet to the edge of the caldera.

The climate has a particular effect on Sigalas's assyrtiko, too, bringing more ripeness to the grapes. While the most prominent style of Santorini these days is crisp, clean, sharp and angular, Sigalas's wines stand out for a broad creaminess that brings to mind Burgundy—a comparison that pleases him, as it was Burgundy that got him interested in wine, back when he was studying math in Paris.

His new wine, Cavaleiros, grows at a less protected site—a vineyard he purchased in 2009 near Imerovigli, a town south of here and significantly higher up, along the curve of the crescent on the way to Fira, the capital. While it shares the full texture common to his wines, rather than roundness of fruit, it's all about minerality—a surprise given the warm, early 2010 vintage. "In 2010, the acidity at Cavaleiros was actually higher than in 2009," Sigalas says. "Maybe this area will provide wines with good aging capacity and delicacy."

Heading south to Pyrgos, two-thirds of the way down the crescent, the view from the edge of the volcano is spectacular, with the caldera to the right and the blue sea edging the other side of the island. Vineyards spread in every direction as I get closer to the town, the center of grape growing on Santorini. Haridimos Hatzidakis has a cellar somewhere up beyond Pyrgos, between here and the monastery of Profitis Ilias that crowns the island at 1,856 feet, its highest point.

But his winery is not easy to find: Off to the left and set back from the road, there's essentially a cave covered with chicken wire that's been thatched with grape stems. The light may catch the gleam of some steel tanks or the basket press, off to the side. Hatzidakis is one of the island's top talents; he came to make wine for Boutari at its new Santorini outpost in the late 1980s and stayed on to start his own brand in 1997.

As I get out of the car, a wicked, wet wind hits me. This is Santorini's extreme side, the wind whistling through the power lines and threatening to rip several loose tarps to shreds. Hatzidakis appears and quickly ushers me into the cave, moving his large frame with practiced ease through the tight spaces.

Terraced vineyards outside Pyrgos

He heads straight to an old square tank and taps it, pouring out a wine as fragrant as peach preserves. "It's aidani," he says. A local variety, it's typically blended with assyrtiko in very small amounts for dry wines (maybe five percent), or reserved for sun-dried sweet wines; this is the first time I've tasted it pure. "The problem with aidani is the acidity," he says. "It doesn't have enough, so it needs to be blended with assyrtiko."

He pulls a bottle from a small fridge, an assyrtiko with about 30 percent aidani. Here, assyrtiko's acidity picks up the peach preserves flavor and carries it, providing the structure he thinks aidani lacks. It's not a complex wine—nor does he present it as one, having handed label design over to his kids, who drew stick figures and suns with crayons. But it is distinctly Santorini, the acidity that runs through it as bracing as the cutting wind outside.

For contrast, he pours an assyrtiko from Milos, a vineyard below Pyrgos with old vines and a south-southwest exposure. "It's sunnier and a little warmer than most spots," he explains, "and I harvest it last." Milos is a huge wine, filled with a ripeness that approaches pineapple, underlined with serious, stony minerality. Although the polar opposite of the fun little assyrtiko–aidani blend, it is also distinctly Santorini. Tasting them side-by-side places the Assyrtiko–Aidani as an aperitif, a wine to sip with fried artichokes while Milos is aerating in a carafe, readying for a leg of lamb.

The wind hasn't died down when we emerge, and I head down the slope to Episkopi. The area's famous church, a clay-tiled Byzantine monument that's survived since the 11th century, looms over the landscape dotted with vines. By the time I reach Canava Roussos, the gale has faded to a stiff breeze, and the sun feels almost warm.

It's quiet when I arrive, save for the chirping of small, colorful birds in cages adorning the walls of the courtyard. "It's a tradition in this area," says Agape Roussos, emerging from the winery. "The men used to hunt birds, trapping them in cages. Now we just keep them for their beauty."

Founded in 1836, Roussos is one of the oldest working wineries on the island. It still uses cement *patitiris* for stomping grapes—one for reds and a deeper one with thicker walls for whites. Like a bodega in Jerez, the building is oriented to keep fresh air flowing through the space.

Leaving the damp chill of the winery, we head to the courtyard, where Roussos pours me a taste of the Nykteri, loosely meaning "of the night." A traditional style, it used to denote a sort of reserve, highlighting wines made from grapes pressed the same day they were picked, an effort that required picking before dawn and crushing well into the night.

A 2007, it's a deep, rich gold—ten times darker than any Santorini I've seen—and it hits 14 percent alcohol. "We begin picking for the Nykteri three weeks later than we would for a regular wine," Roussos explains, "then crush the fruit and leave it on its stems and skins for two days." Half of it goes into barrels to ferment, and they regularly stir the lees.

It's almost overwhelming in its power, with roasted almond and mocha flavors pushed on a wave of alcohol, and Roussos laughs, seeing my reaction. "Old timers will come and complain to my dad, "Where's the wine?" To them, the new styles of Santorini have no flavor; they want strong wines," she says, pouring a 2001. This one is even darker, with a rich, peachy scent. "The older they get, the more they smell like Vinsanto; you wouldn't know it wasn't sweet unless you tasted it." In fact, it's surprisingly savory, the rich burnt orange and nutty notes riding over dense, chalky minerality. Roussos suggests it's the sort of wine that needs food—an octopus *stifado*, perhaps, or, of course, roast lamb.

The next morning, I wake to a crash—the wind has blown the patio table over. The wind follows me as I drive along the edge of the caldera, heading to the southern end of the crescent, where Boutari has a winery in Megalochori. It was Boutari that helped inspire Santorini's wine renaissance, after chief enologist Yannis Voyatzis and a team of researchers canvassed the island in the 1980s, launching the winery in 1989.

Voyatzis meets me in the bright and modern tasting room, his bright pink sweater and purple-framed glasses contradicting his reputation as a quiet, unassuming guy. Having heard I'm a cheese geek, he's gathered some 20-odd cheeses from Santorini and nearby is-

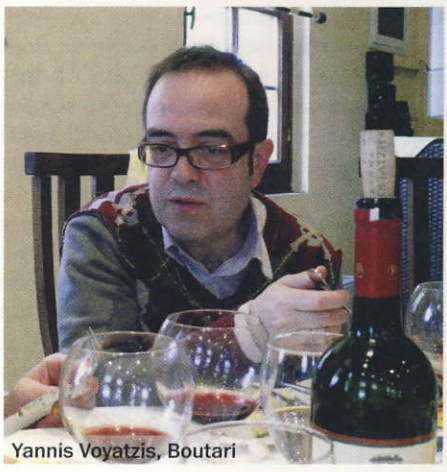
Songbirds outside Canava Roussos

lands, along with an extensive array of wines, all variations on Santorini. We start with the straight Santorini, a crisp, clean white that's become a reference for the island's wines, ending with the Kallisti Reserve, the first of the new wave oak-aged Santorinis and still the benchmark.

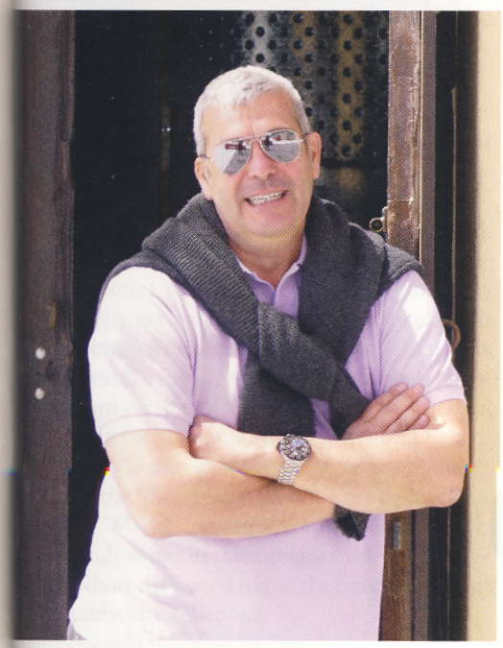
In between, he's poured Selladia, a single-vineyard wine from a 15-acre plot south of here, toward Akrotiri, planted in 1990. While not prime assyrtiko territory, Voyatzis tells me it's what they could buy at the time. A blend of 40 percent assyrtiko with equal parts aidani and athiri, the wines from Selladia are completely different from the others—almost buxom, with a succulent, sweet pineapple richness and a floral perfume.

The other is the Nykteri. Today, Nykteri is a PDO that requires oak aging, but that law wasn't in effect in 1996, the vintage that's grabbed our attention. The grapes come from Pyrgos as well as Thirasia, a tiny island in the caldera whose grapes are the last to come in—in part, Voyatzis says, because they have just one picker there, and it takes him awhile. It's robustly ripe, but the acidity cuts an elegant line through its deep, chalky flavors, keeping it lithe and fresh, the wine's age perceptible only in a hint of caramel.

The cheeses Voyatzis assembled were meant to be an extracurricular activity, another taste of the island, but with four distinct styles of Santorini at hand, the pairings turned out to be fascinating: Selladia's rich fruit is just the thing for a fresh, creamy anthotiro; the aged Nykteri finds its match in



Yannis Voyatzis, Boutari



"In Pyrgos, you have the altitude, and it's colder. But the difference is not only aspect; it's also sociology. The Pyrgians are a real society of good vinegrowers; that's their thing, and you can see it in a vine."

—Yiannis Paraskevopoulos, Gai'a

the Arseniko, an oil-cured round from Naxos that tastes like a sausage. Rather than any one style coming out on top, each has a place at the table.

Later that afternoon, Gai'a winemaker Yiannis Paraskevopoulos meets me at *Selene*, a restaurant that owner Giorgos Hatziyiannakis has made a showcase for the island's best produce.

Paraskevopoulos has already decanted his wines, something he does as a rule these days. "With all the sulfur in the soil, these are reductive wines—we could never use screwcaps on Santorini," he says. Paraskevopoulos lives in Athens, teaching enology at Athens University, and spends much of his time at his winery in Nemea, an hour and a half south of the city. But his knowledge of Santorini's vineyards and soils runs deep, having researched them extensively in the 1980s as part of the Boutari team before he launched his own label in 1994.

He pours the 2010 Thalassitis, a 100 percent assyrtiko vinified in stainless steel. It tastes like the air outside, cool and salty, and it cuts like a knife through a slice of *lardi*, pig fat cured with thyme and *throumbi*, a wild savory.

For Thalassitis, Paraskevopoulos looks to Pyrgos, an area he considers the premier place to buy grapes. "You have the altitude, of course, and it is colder," he says. "The grapes mature about two weeks later than in the lower areas, so they are more fragrant. But it's not only aspect; it's also sociology. The Pyrgians are a real society of good vinegrowers—that's their thing, and you can see it in a vine."

After the earthquake of 1956, many people fled the island, he explains, taking with them the knowledge of how to care for these peculiar vines. The Pyrgians, however, continued to farm vines—wine having always been their main focus—rather than the tomatoes, barley, cotton and fava that once augmented the island's economy. "For instance, not only will they often manually weed—for the struggle for water can be brutal—but they'll also create small channels for the eventuality of rain. And as harvest approaches and the direct heat of the sun becomes dangerous, they'll collect dead leaves and use them to shade the clusters."

Pyrgos is also the source of his latest project, the Gai'a 2010 Wild Ferment Assyrtiko. He finds spontaneous fermentations to be a challenge on Santorini, since there seems to be an unusually high number of yeasts and bacteria working in unison rather than one dominant strain. Like the vines of Santorini, Paraskevopoulos theorizes, the yeasts have had to evolve to be able to withstand this strange, high-sulfur environment. Still, he admits, "I don't really know. I freak out every vintage; I lose fifteen to nineteen percent of the production every year. But multiple strains give multiple effects, I think, like the difference between using just one kind of barrel or many different ones."

The Wild Ferment tastes richer, the minerality more textured—chalk and pumice, ash and stone bound together in a broad, leesy flavor. Oak adds smoke and sweet elements that are distracting when the wine is tasted alone, but then comes the ubiquitous dish of fava, a purée of a local pulse that looks and tastes a bit like yellow split peas, only earthier. This fava is particularly silky, with a subtle smokiness—a play on an old festival dish. "They would cook the fava in big pots over fires made from vine cuttings," Hatziyiannakis tells me, "and it would take on a smoky flavor."

Fava is made from a local pulse grown on Santorini, *Lathyrus clemens*, related to sweet peas. Chefs off-island often substitute yellow lentils.

While we sip the Wild Ferment and scoop fava from a shared plate, it strikes me that these staples of Santorini have a lot in common: Both have survived because they are tenacious—they hold the island's fragile soils in place. What separates fava beans and assyrtiko vines from weeds are the possibilities they present, from simple to complex variations on a theme of Santorini. And, of course, that they can be delicious. ■