

The Greek reviews in this issue have a fair number of Assyrtiko offerings, among others (including some fine bargains in reds). Although there is Assyrtiko made in other places in Greece (some of which is rather charming, but usually not made in quite the same, steely style), Santorini is the signature appellation for Assyrtiko, so let me say a few general words about Santorini wines (overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly Assyrtiko) for those just getting to know them. This small appellation often surprises people because Santorini is best known as a tourist destination given its gorgeous location, with the vivid blue water contrasting with the pretty, white buildings in fairy tale fashion. (You can see some photographic evidence on eRobertParker.com here) Yet, this is a small and special wine region, too, with an ancient tradition. The grapes are grown differently, in low, basket shaped vines; it rarely rains – water often comes with the evening fog; and the old vines were never attacked by phylloxera (Santorini’s volcanic soils are evidently not acceptable for phylloxera).



Typical appellation whites are generally just called “Santorini” – you are expected to know that means it is an Assyrtiko-dominated wine under appellation rules. Pure and steely, they have fine depth and hold up well to food. Santorini’s other signature wine is its fantastic and ageworthy sweet wine called Vinsanto, which is an ancient island trademark copied by many; hint: vinSANTOas in Santorini. It is dominated by Assyrtiko, of course. Some wines have small amounts of Santorini’s more minor whites –Athiri and Aidani (up to 25% combined).

Besides those pure and steely Asstyrikos, you can find other types of wines on Santorini, of course, including monovarietal Aidani, the occasional red and other versions of Assyrtiko, such as oaked wines.

The latter provoke occasional controversy, but the truth is that some of them are exceptional. The oaked style may not match the steely, purist vision of Assyrtiko that many of its rabid enthusiasts tend to share, but producers like *Sigalas* and Argyros, to name two, handle oak beautifully.

The unoaked Assyrtikos are wines that I once called a cross between Chablis and Trocken Riesling. Analogies are often imprecise, of course, but by that I meant that they have transparency, a stone-washed demeanor and age pretty well when properly made. They are piercing and intense. Many of Greece’s loveliest white wines are ethereal – like the underrated Moschofileros that I have increasingly come to appreciate. They have relatively short life spans and not much depth. By contrast, Santorini Assyrtikos have depth, power and high acidity. They hold up well to food and they are awfully good seafood and shellfish matchups. They are sometimes crisp and steely enough when young that I’ve often found it useful to decant the powerful, young ones – something that surprised one prominent winemaker when, at his winery in Greece, I suggested it. He now recommends it, too. *Sigalas, one of the flagship producers*, actually recommends cellaring the wine for two years before opening, not something you see too much from Greek white winemakers. So, if you’re going to plunge into the big 2010 Santorinis this summer – give them some air. They are not, to be sure, all alike; no region has every wine exactly alike, of course.

Are there downsides to Assyrtiko? Winemakers have said to me that it is hard to handle because it is prone to oxidation. Even some examples I’ve seen young that should age, given their structure and acidity, do not because somewhere along the way something happened that cut short their lifespans. It is also not a particularly aromatic grape. While it does have fine depth, acidity and ageworthiness, all of which makes it a great food matchup, it is not particularly fragrant and does not have loads of personality by the standard of grapes, say, like Sauvignon Blanc. You have to be interested in its crisp, stone-washed purity, solidity and power.

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The 2010s from Santorini are mostly in the USA now. They were initially a bit hard to approach, but they wound up showing well overall, making a nice bookend to the 2009s, although I have a decided preference at the moment for the 2009s. Santorini does, of course, tend to be fairly consistent in general quality, at least in the abstract. There are some ups and downs and certainly some stylistic differences, but it is rare to have an off vintage. The more I tasted the 2010s, after loving a lot of 2009s (more of which are reviewed this issue, especially in the oaked versions), the more I found some enticing wines.

Despite ultimately fine results in both years, Gai'a's owner, Yiannis Paraskevopoulos (producer of the well known Thalassitis bottling), indicated that 2009 was a very different year than 2010 because of the cool August in 2009. "An example in numbers, that highlights the above, is harvest 2009 that took us some 15 days to harvest 120,000 kg of Assyrtiko versus harvest 2010 that only took 9 days for the same amount of grapes. The 2009 August was a particularly cold one that allowed us to have a relaxed and slow harvest, even waiting in some cases for the specific plots to arrive at the exact point of sugar concentration that we needed them to be. On the other hand 2010 was a "normal" warm August that obliged us to rush and get the berries in before overripening."

Sigalas, one of the island's elite, benchmark producers, did experience some alcohol spikes as a result. Oenologist Charikleia Mavrommati told me, "In 2010, [two] contradictory situations occurred, regarding the climatic conditions, which refer to the quality of the grapes. During winter and spring time excellent climatic conditions assured the good quality of grapes (many rainfalls and specifically one in the end of May¼.). Unfortunately, the last month before maturation, we didn't notice any northern winds, which create ideal conditions for the sanitary condition of the grapes. Furthermore, during harvest period we had rather suddenly, increased temperatures in all regions simultaneously. So, the alcoholic volume couldn't be easily controlled under these conditions and you will notice the same in all wines of Santorini, which will be their characteristic for this vintage¼. Usually Santorini gets expressed better at an alc. Volume of 13.5%. A 13.2% in 2009 was ok and not at all low. [Note: The winery told me that the 2007 and 2008 Santorinis were each 13.5%.] On the contrary, 2010 vintage got this 14% because of a sudden maturation of the grapes, which couldn't be predicted. Note also that the harvest started earlier this year, because of these climatic conditions."

In fact, however conditions were controlled, not every winery reported significant alcohol spikes. It may have depended on when each winery's harvest took place. I asked for information from a couple of other top producers just to be sure. Argyros reported modest but normal spikes, telling me that from 2009 to 2010 the wines went from 13.2% to 13.5% on the Estate-Oak, and 13 to 13.2% on both the Assyrtiko and the regular Estate bottling. Gai'a's figures, however, actually went down in some instances, declining to 13.3 in 2010 for the oak-fermented Thalassitis compared to 13.4 in 2009; and to 12.88 in 2010 on the "Wild Ferment" from 13.3 in 2009. The 2010 non-oaked Thalassitis did show a minor rise from 12.91 to 13.00. Despite some early and ominous innuendo that I felt compelled to address, this doesn't seem to be much of an issue for most producers. It would also be fair to note that Assyrtiko around 14% or so is not exactly unheard of on the island, particularly with the "Nykteri" bottlings one often sees (where the wine is made the night of the same day it was harvested).

Assyrtiko is one of Greece's claims to fame and it reaches its peak on Santorini. These are well worth exploring. Just as a very big cherry on top – they are nicely priced, too.

—Mark Squires