



INTERNATIONAL
Sommelier
GUILD

Sommelier News

January 2011

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Santorini Sweetie

Vinsanto is so not Italian

By Lana Bortolot

Pity Vinsanto. It's produced in small quantities, hard to find, and it's pricey. And, adding to its identity crisis: everyone thinks it's Italian.

But there's a good chance at least some of that will change. With Greek wines coming of age—a funny concept when you think Greece has one of the oldest winemaking cultures in the world—more people might identify with Vinsanto. And that would be just fine with Greek winemak-

ers.

"There is no Italian version of Vinsanto," says Matthew Argyros, 29, fourth-generation winemaker at the estate bearing his family name. "The only version is from Santorini. They are just two completely different wines. Vinsanto is a very old tradition, but a very new proposal," he says.

Last year, Greek wines overall enjoyed a

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Grapes drying in the warm Mediterranean sun

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higher profile in the states and Canada, thanks in part to the launch of a North American marketing campaign funded by Greece and the European Union. Current efforts focus on Santorini, the mythical volcanic island that many a Greek yarn-spinner will claim is Atlantis. That, of course, adds to the allure of a wine produced from the island's hardscrabble volcanic soil and against the harsh Etesian winds, locally called the *Meltemi*.

Assyrtiko is the primary variety here, and the one from which Vinsanto is made (at least 75 percent). Wine drinkers are now getting hip to the single-varietal in its basic form—a racy, mineral-driven white with eyebrow-raising acid and unique compatibility with seafood. Assyrtiko is the gorgeous “it girl”; Vinsanto is her rich and refined aunt.

“It’s a really interesting product. Anything that’s Assyrtiko-based is gaining momentum in the market, in the way Chardonnay-based wines are not,” says Marko Babsek of Winebow, a premium New York City importer that has about 130 Greek wines in its portfolio.

So, why is Vinsanto still a wallflower?

In part, because most people associate it with the sweet dessert wine from Tuscany. Known there as Vin Santo or Vino Santo (“holy wine”), it was brought over to Italy from the Venetian-occupied island of Santorini when the Venetians left in the 15th century. From the beginning, it was an example of marketing, Italian-style. The Venetians renamed the island, known as Thira in ancient Greece, Santorini—a lingual mutation of Santa Irene. Thus, the wines made there reflect this beginning: Vino di Santorini—wine of Santorini. And so, from the beginning, Vinsanto was a place-of-origin wine. It’s a little history lesson worth noting: after Italians co-opted the wine, the Greeks won the right to the name. Only wine from Santorini may be called Vinsanto (one word).

Fierce defenders of Vinsanto have one more point of insistence. Greeks lay claim to the production process, also adopted by the Italians, since antiquity. (Full disclosure: this writer is exactly half Greek and half Italian.) The poet and chronicler of ancient Greek life, Hesiod (circa 700 BC), wrote about the process of making a sweet wine called Paso, describing drying the grapes in the sun before aging them in vessels. Italians adopted the process—drying the grapes in attics, not the sun—therefore giving Greeks



Basket Vines

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the proprietary claim to Vinsanto as a “wine of the sun.”

Though Greek producers want to promote their modern technology and new generation of young winemakers, they are also proud that their Vinsanto is largely untouched by modern technology—made the same way today as in ancient times.

“There is no technical info on Vinsanto because it was always made traditionally,” says Darrell Corti, co-owner of the venerable Corti Brothers gourmet emporium in Sacramento. “You might progress it along if there was science, but there is no science.”

Infinite fermentation and aging

Assyrtiko and Aidani and/or Athiri, the other grapes often in Vinsanto, reach high levels of ripeness (and sugar) on the vine before picking. The hand-picked grapes dry from six to 14 days in the sun before crush and initial fermentation. The fermentation starts naturally by indigenous yeasts and may continue



Barrel sampling Vinsanto with Matthew Argyros

for two or even three years at times, stopping and starting again, notes winemaker Paris Sigalas, who produces about 10,000 bottles per year from 50-year-old vines. Indeed, Gaia winemaker Yiannis Paraskevopoulos says “some say the fermentation never really stops.”

Then the wait begins. The very sweet initial must—up to 500 grams of sugar per liter—will end up at about 250-300 grams. The minimum aging for Vinsanto is two years before release (appellation-mandated), but most wine makers opt for longer aging in traditional large casks and older barriques.

“Aging in oak barrels normally takes place from three to 20 years and in some special occasions for more than 60 or 80,” says Haridimos Hatzidakis, whose boutique winery boasts ancient caves for storage. “Producers often do blends of different vintages to have more complex wines, but ‘Vinsanto mille-simés’—when a year is considered special—are not rare.”

George Koutsoyannopolous of Volcan Wines boasts of his 1959 Vinsanto, which German wine critic Marcus Hofschuster gave 95 points in a competition last year. He noted “lots of coffee and cocoa, but also dried plums and currants—on the one hand very sweet, but also very subtle, with fine levels of acid-

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ity, deep and very persistent on the palate. Intense spicy herbs and again there is a clear maltiness, very pure, perfectly balanced.”

Producers sometimes fortified the fermentations with *tsipouro*, a spirit resembling a Greek grappa; higher-quality producers use yeast strains to extend the fermentation, naturally yielding alcohol levels of 13+ percent.

The natural fermentation and sweetness of the must can't be replicated elsewhere says Agape Roussou, 29, of Canava Roussou, her family's winery near the foot of ancient Thira. "There are no sugars added, as they do elsewhere with sweet wines. and that makes it probably the most natural of all drinks.”

Terroir in the glass

"If you're talking about wines that say 'I come from a place'—that's Santorini," says Corti. And, he adds, there's a price to pay for that honor. Andrea Englis of Athenee Importers in New York says the price point, up to \$100 a bottle, is Vinsanto's main challenge. "People would do that for a Sauternes, but there's not enough awareness about Vinsanto for that to happen—yet. But, it will be like a silent assassin," she says.

"The challenge for Vinsanto is its price point," agrees Winebow's Babsek. "Just putting it on a wine list will do nothing for it. It's going to take time to turn people around. But at least in the NYC metro area, people want to try Greek wines because they're associated with fresh quality.”

Low yields (it takes about four kg of grapes to produce 750 ml of wine), intensive labor and long aging times make Vinsanto a costly product. And indeed, everything about it conjures up riches: deep gold color and flavors ranging from zesty citrus and dried fruit to complex caramel, toffee and chocolate.

Montreal-based Greek wine ambassador Veronique Rivest said she couldn't think of an-

other wine that balances the line between acid and sugar so well. "There's still a lot of vibrancy about it even when you go into that heavy fruit. There's also a briney note—an impression of salt—and that's even more Greek and even more Santorini. That's a real Santorini terroir.”

She adds, "For the best wines in the world should have the quality of transporting you to another world, and Greek Vinsanto definitely does that.”

Rivest sees ample opportunity to introduce Vinsanto in Canada, especially in the more Euro-influenced province of Quebec. "Quebec was one of the largest markets for Port, where there's more of a notion that wine is food. People here, in general, live to eat. We see people spending lots of time at the table—it's very much a food culture.”

And culture—whether food- or history-based—might be the way to sell the esoteric wine. Master Sommelier Laura Williamson, vice president of sales for San Diego-based Rudi West Selection, tasted the wine at the source in her travels to Santorini last year. She calls Vinsanto "more intricate and layered" than other dessert wines and also advises sommeliers to engage customers with its unique past.

"When people know they're having a little slice of ancient history, they respect in a whole different and you can see them honor it," she said. "Even though it's expensive, you can charge by the glass and you won't have waste from it. It's proven how long it lasts," she says. "The challenge is trying to educate those [sommeliers] who do have the clientele for it and for whom the price doesn't get in the way.”

Says Argyros, the Santorini winemaker, "A sommelier who has tasted Vinsanto at least once is able to convince people to try. If you do the first step, Vinsanto will never let you down." 

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