

COLUMN



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On tasting Assyritiko from Santorini's Domaine Sigalas during the London launch of Volcanic Wines of the World

Santorini and its acclaimed white grape – Assyritiko

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Santorini is not just one of the most beautiful Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. It is more than that. Its charm is enhanced by Greek mythology and set in ancient movements of the earth such as the volcanic eruptions that created the island's crescent-shaped caldera, the only one of its kind anywhere. Shrouded in myth and shaped by the forces of nature, Santorini is unique. Besides its picture-perfect beauty that attracts tourists in hordes, with dazzling white houses topped by distinctive blue domes and narrow winding lanes with bright bougainvillea, it is also steeped in winemaking history.

Santorini is the natural birthplace of one of the world's most acclaimed native grapes – the white grape, Assyritiko (A seer-tee-ko). Beloved today of wine critics and sommeliers for its complexity, versatility and food friendliness, Assyritiko thrives on Santorini's stark volcanic soils, whipped by strong ocean breezes, achieving a level of perfection as nowhere else in the world.

During the October launch event of the Volcanic Wines of the World in London – a newly-formed trade body that brings together wine regions located on volcanic soils – I found myself walking in with a keen sense of anticipation. Many of the wines born on volcanic soils are connoisseurs' delights, and I was sure I

would find Assyritiko.

I did. I also met Spyro Lemanis, the hospitality director of Domaine Sigalas, arguably the most famous of the tiny island's 18 wine producers. With him I tasted the wines and listened to stories of Santorini. I was enthralled.

Santorini might boast a long history of vine-growing, but Domaine Sigalas set up production as late as 1991. The young Paris Sigalas, then a high school math teacher, would visit his family home on the island during the summer holidays and work on the vines with his father and grandfather, both vine-growers. At the time, they grew grapes in tiny quantities for the domestic market. But the far-sighted Sigalas realized that one day Assyritiko's fame would spread, creating a demand that would be hard to meet. So, Domaine Sigalas was founded as a crowd-sourced entity. Friends put in money to create a modern winemaking facility on the island.

It was the start of a journey. Within 10 years, Sigalas began exporting his wine to the US, selling to a Greek populace that had made their home there. And while the demand for Santorini's Assyritiko has soared in wine markets, Lemanis tells me there is little chance of expansion or volume growth.

"We work out of a tiny volcanic island; there

is a ceiling on how much we can produce." In a good year, Sigalas might produce 200,000 bottles, in difficult years, perhaps half of that.

The other major factor controlling production are the strict rules governing PDO Santorini (Protected Designation of Origin). It is designated a white wine only appellation – Assyritiko rules here. Yields are controlled strictly, to deliver quality, but are naturally low owing to extreme weather conditions with warm dry summers and very little rainfall. No irrigation is permitted, so vines depend on moisture created by fog from the caldera and the strong sea winds that whip the island, depositing condensation on the parched, volcanic soils.

A second limiting factor is Santorini's historic 'kouloura' or basket vine-training system, used for growing Assyritiko. This requires skilled manual tending, as the vines hug the soil as they grow, coiling into tightly woven baskets. This unique system ensures that the grapes can never grow too big or too many and is, as Lemanis describes it, "a marvel of prehistoric engineering" that has been sustained for centuries.

"It is ideal for our conditions on the island. In the warm summer, the wood shelters the bunches from the sun in a protective hug. As sea water evaporates and condenses in the dawn, the moisture drops into the soil and is absorbed by the vines." A higher, more conventional trellis would waste precious moisture, says Lemanis.

Retreat to a quiet corner and swirl my glass of Assyritiko and let myself be transported once again to the Greek isles. My dry Assyritiko is laden with ripe tropical fruit yielding to hints of citrus peel and stone fruit, but with dominant notes of stone, smoky flint and salinity held up by tingling acidity. Refreshing, yet so complex.

The versatility of the grape is demonstrated in the high quality of its other avatar – Santorini's Vinsanto – a rich sweet wine, that is made in even tinier quantities from late-harvested Assyritiko. It is aged oxidatively in large casks which encourage evaporation and concentrate

the flavours of honeyed almonds, creamy chocolate, and toasted hazelnuts. The high sugar is balanced by Assyritiko's naturally high acidity, creating a wine that is both rare and very special; and worth buying if you can source a bottle.

But Lemanis has another surprise up his sleeve – a unique Santorini red wine crafted by Sigalas, from the rare native grape,

Mavrotragano. Sigalas had discovered a few vines left on the island, and carefully nurtured them to create a red wine which was virtually unheard of in Santorini. As PDO regulations cover only Assyritiko, Mavrotragano is vinified outside PDO rules, grown on low trellises rather than in the kouloura basket, and irrigation is permitted. Lemanis describes Mavrotragano as "Assyritiko in red grape form". It makes a richly-layered and concentrated wine, with notes of cocoa, spices and chunky dark berries that linger long on the palate.

Meanwhile, I am drawn back to the legends that surround the island of Santorini. One speaks of Euphemus, son of Poseidon, and his love for a beautiful nymph. To protect her from Poseidon's wrath and give her a home, he is said to have dropped a fistful of earth into the sea from which sprung up a beautiful island – Santorini, the jewel among the islands of the Cyclades. But my favourite legend is the one that speaks of Santorini as the original site of Atlantis, the mythical lost city of gold, which is believed to lie beneath the impossibly deep waters in the heart of the island's caldera. I do believe that golden Atlantis exists in Santorini. And, today, it has appeared in the form of Assyritiko in my glass. ❖



Paris Sigalas pictured with the historic basket vine-training system, 'kouloura', used for growing Assyritiko

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