

It's Greek to Me

By Sharon McDonnell

It's called the most-photographed sunset in Greece: people gather by the hundreds in Oia, a small town on the island of Santorini, sitting on steps and low walls, in outdoor "sunset bars" or by the Venetian castle, cameras and cellphones poised, to catch the sun serenely sinking into the Aegean Sea. The hauntingly familiar scene is a Cubist fantasy of stark white boxy houses, some turquoise-domed, some salmon-pink, perched on cliffs, facing a teal-blue sea against a cloudless blue sky. Tiny "islands" nearby are actually parts of Santorini that remained above sea level after a volcano erupted about 3,600 years ago, submerging most of Santorini beneath the sea, and they seem to float in the caldera, or filled-in crater.

"Catch the moment, not the photo," a philosophical bit of graffiti on a wall urged. Good advice – this island in the Cycladic chain that also includes Mykonos, Paros and Delos is more than a photographer's dream. It's the home of crisp dry white wines tasting of minerals that reflect the volcanic soil, some of the first Greek wines to win PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) status. The signature grape of Santorini is Assyrtiko, whose full-bodied high-acid wines smell of citrus and account for 70 percent of the island's vineyards. It's often combined with Athiri, which makes for a medium-bodied white with delicate aromas, and Aidani, which produces a medium-bodied white, pleasantly acidic and aromatic. Nykteri, a blend of mostly Assyrtiko but also Athiri and Aidani, is made in stainless steel, then aged in oak for at least three months.

Santorini's prized dessert wine, Vinsanto, is a blend of the three white grapes (but more than half Assyrtiko) and smells like dried fruit, raisins and sweet spices. It tastes like Port but is traditionally made in a different process: the grapes are sun-dried for 12-14 days until they resemble raisins, then crushed, fermented and aged in oak for at least two years.

Two red wine types, to a much lesser degree, are also grown on Santorini: Mavrotragano, an endangered red protected with intense tannins and fresh fruit and spice aromas, and Mandilaria, which makes a medium-bodied red with dark red fruit aromas. You won't find other European grapes here: it's illegal to grow them.

"Every winery has its own charm, but Santo Wines by far has the most breathtaking view. It's one of the biggest properties facing the caldera," says Ilias Roussakis, whose tour company, Wine in Santorini, drives visitors to several wineries to taste 15-20 wines – an ideal way to avoid the island's vertiginous cliffside roads. He's not kidding; the view of the caldera way below the gigantic terrace, a cruise ship that looks like a toy, and stark-white villages crowning brownish-red cliffs, is staggering. Santo, a wine co-operative near Pyrgos, south of Fira (Thira), the capital, is Santorini's biggest wine producer. It's also a favorite spot for weddings. Its big shop is a great place to stock up on local foods, from olives, fava beans, cherry tomatoes and



Vineyards on Santorini don't look like American vineyards. The vines are coiled into wreaths that resemble nests to protect against the intense heat and harsh summer wind, called the *meltemi*, of this desert island of few trees, explains Roussakis, a winemaker trained in France and Athens. The island's winemaking history precedes the cataclysmic volcanic eruption of about 1,600 B.C. that destroyed the Minoan settlement of Akrotiri, whose well-preserved frescoed houses and furnishings can be visited in Santorini's south. At a wine museum at Koutsoyiannopoulos Winery, near Kamari, I learned about this history and Santorini's 18th-century wine trade with Russia, especially with the Black Sea seaport of Odessa, thanks to dioramas and traditional winemaking implements and vessels.

Art and wine are a terrific pairing. The owner of Art Space, a winery and gallery, certainly thinks so. Besides a tasting at this winery in Exo Gonia, I admired hundreds of paintings and sculptures by three dozen contemporary European artists, mostly Greek, in the gallery, whose dramatic whitewashed long narrow space and hollowed-out vaulted ceilings mimicked Santorini's ubiquitous cave-like dwellings, dug out of sheer rock.

While indelible memories from my first Santorini visit in the 1980s lingered – lying in a lounge chair, my feet dangling over the side of a cliff – I was stunned to discover the changes on my recent visit. Oia's main street, built from marble, is now lined with shops selling jewelry, scarves, clothing and art. But it's still Santorini, complete with new and old restaurants such as Red Bicycle, where my dinner of gourmet Greek food was paired with a sublime sea panorama, and luxury hotels like Grace Santorini and Iconic Santorini, both near Oia, whose infinity pools jutting out from white-on-white cave-like structures offer mesmerizing views of the caldera far below.

A few more winery favorites:

- **Estate Argyros in Episkopi Gonia.**
Award-winning Argyros is known for its stainless-steel Assyrtiko, its barrel-fermented Assyrtiko blend, a 20-year-old Vinsanto (aged 17 years in French oak, three years in the bottle) and 5-year-old Vinsanto.
- **Domaine Sigalas in Oia.**
Enjoy a tasting of local food and wine in a patio next to a vineyard at award-winning Sigalas, notable for its single-vineyard



Kavalieros ("cavalier") Assyrtiko, Assyrtiko-Athiri blend, Mavrotragano and Vinsanto. It's considered Santorini's most innovative winery.

- **Gaia Wines in Monolithos.**
Gaia is recognized for its bone-dry Thalassitis Assyrtiko, its oak-fermented Thalassitis Assyrtiko and its wild-yeast-fermented Assyrtiko.
- **Gavalas Wines in Megalochori.**
Credited with reviving two obscure white grapes in its Katsano-Gaidouria blend; also known for its Assyrtiko.

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www.visitgreece.gr/en/greek_islands/santorini
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