

Greek whites: Zingy companion to dolmades

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Have you considered a Greek wine with Sunday dinner? A change of pace always does a soul good, especially that of a wine lover.

Don't recoil at the idea, especially if you plan on pouring a white. Greek whites today are much more than retsina, an aromatic wine laced with pine-tree resin that dates back some 3,000 years.

"They've got acidity, aroma, lots of minerals," said Sofia Perpera, an oenologist who is director of All About Greek Wine, an Atlanta marketing company working with Greek wineries. "Moschofilero is romantic with a great acidity. Assyrtiko has nice body and great acidity."

Rooted in the glory days of classical Greece, today's wine industry has been pumped up over the last 40 years by new investment and new technology. Indigenous grape varieties with, for non-Greeks, tongue-twisting names like agiorgitiko (ah-yohr-YEE-tee-koh), moschofilero (mo-sko-FEE-leh-ro), xinomavro (zee-NOH-mah-vroh) and assyrtiko (ah-SYR-tih-koh) are grown along with more familiar international varieties like sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay.

Perpera said that most people new to the wine are particularly surprised by the whites. There's a lemony aspect to the whites that keys into the flavors of Greek cooking. That may explain why Alpana Singh is so taken with assyrtiko (also spelled assyrtico). This white could be Greece's answer to pinot grigio, albarino or even gruner veltliner, she says.

Singh is the wine and spirits director of Lettuce Entertain You

Enterprises restaurant group. She recently returned from a 10-day wine tour of Greece. After sampling some 250 Greek wines, Singh predicted that consumers will be "wowed" by them because so many come to the wines with low expectations. The biggest challenge will be learning how to pronounce the grapes, she said.

The second biggest challenge, she said, is educating wine drinkers to all the variety of Greek wine out there. The word hasn't quite gotten out.

"I was almost angry because if I hadn't gone there I wouldn't have discovered all the varieties," Singh said. "That's like thinking of Italy only as pinot grigio."

Wines are made across the country and is rooted in its ancient culture.

"Wine for Greeks is part of everyday life, the everyday meal," she said. "The wines are meant to be served with food. These are not show-off wines that are going to get you 95 or 100 points in a competition, but you'll want a second bottle on the table."

STUFFED GRAPE LEAVES WITH RICE

(Dolmades)

1/2 cup olive oil

3 yellow onions, chopped

1 cup uncooked rice

1 cup water

2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill

2 tablespoons pine nuts, optional

1 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

1 jar (8 ounces) grape leaves, rinsed in cold water, or 50-60 fresh grape leaves

Juice of 1 lemon

Heat 1/4 cup of the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat; cook onions until soft, about 5 minutes. Add the rice; cook, stirring, until rice begins to color. Cover; lower heat to low. Cook five minutes. Stir in the water, dill, pine nuts, salt and pepper; simmer five minutes. Let cool. (If using fresh grape leaves, drop them into boiling water and boil three minutes. Drain; rinse in cold water. Set aside.)

Place a heaping teaspoon of the filling in the center of each grape leaf with the shiny surface down. Fold the sides of the leaf over the filling; roll up loosely (the rice will swell when cooked). Place rolls in layers in a Dutch oven.

Sprinkle with lemon juice. Add remaining 1/4 cup of the olive oil and 1 1/2 cups hot water. Place a heatproof plate over the rolls to prevent them from opening. Cover; simmer over low heat 1 hour. Let cool in the pan; refrigerate until ready to serve.

Makes 10 servings.

Nutrition information per serving: 198 calories, 50 percent of calories from fat, 11 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 23 g carbohydrates, 3 g protein, 239 mg sodium, 3 g fiber

— Recipe adapted from Dean and Catherine Karayanis' book, "Regional Greek Cooking." The ratings reflect how well the wines went with the dolmades.

-- 2006 Domaine Sigalas Santorini: A blend of 70 percent assyrtiko and 30 percent athiri, this white from the famed Aegean island had a resinous edge on the nose softened by notes of honeysuckle. The texture was slightly oily, and the flavor of dried apricots was balanced by a spry acidity. The wine tasted lush paired with the dolmades. 2 corkscrews. \$17

-- 2006 Zacharias Vineyards White Squared: From the Peloponnesian peninsula, a blend of assyrtiko and sklava grapes had a flowery herbal nose with touches of celery salt and pine. Well-balanced, the wine offered strong fruit, a lively tartness and a creamy minerality. The wine gave a pleasant kick to the dolmades. 2 corkscrews. \$16

-- 2007 Domaine Skouras Moscofilero: Plenty of citrusy spritz with grapefruit overtones in this wine from the Peloponnesian peninsula. While some thought the wine boosted the dolmades, others believed the tartness of the stuffed grape leaves overwhelmed the wine's more delicate components. 2 corkscrews. \$13

-- 2006 Boutari Santorini: This assyrtiko-based wine had a citrusy aroma and a crisp profile with lots of minerality and a burst of citrus on the finish. But the dolmades overpowered the wine. 2 corkscrews. \$16

-- NV Boutari Retsina: The piney fragrance and flavor of this classic white turned off many of the tasters, but the spicy, aromatic complexity of flavors intrigued a few. Most thought the wine didn't work with the dolmades, but a minority thought the herbal tartness of the grape leaves supported the wine well. 1 corkscrew \$7