



The Big Blue

The Greek island of Santorini is producing better wines than ever, but faces the challenges of tourism and development

Words by Mark Andrew

“All of this was a beautiful three-hectare vineyard, well over 100 years old,” says Santorini winemaker Haridimos Hatzidakis, “but the municipality gave permission for it to be turned into a bike track for tourists.” Just minutes earlier, *Noble Rot* stood breathing the salty sea air in Hatzidakis’ ‘Mylos’ vineyard, discussing the unique Santorinian terroir and vines so ancient that no one knows quite how old they are. Now, here we were, faced with evidence that this heritage is under threat from relentless commercial development. Had we not spent the rest of the afternoon tasting at the Hatzidakis winery, it would’ve proved much harder to forget that bike track – the sight of every new luxury hotel, petrol station or supermarket is a stark reminder that Santorini’s vineyards have shrunk by over 75% in the

past 100 years. As it was, tasting the incredible wines of this true man of the soil provided a delicious example of what it is that needs protecting.

Thankfully, the world is waking up to the vinous treasures that this crumb of volcanic rock is capable of producing, just as they have with Mount Etna, the Jura and Ribeira Sacra. The combination of high-quality but relatively unknown indigenous grape varieties, unique terroirs that imbue the wines with genuine character and numerous small-scale, quality-focused winemakers, has alerted a generation of curious wine lovers to the rewards that can be found off the beaten track.

And while 2,000,000 visitors a year might make this Greek island one of the most intensely beaten tourist tracks on earth, there is still a way to go when it comes to the appreciation and understanding of Santorini's wines.

At 75% of plantings on the island, white grape Assyrtiko is beginning to get the international recognition it deserves, even if it will prove difficult for anywhere to match the winning combination of acidity, ripeness, extract and energy achieved on Santorini. In older vineyards, co-planting alongside other white varieties like aromatic Aidani or fruity Athiri is commonplace, and there are red grapes too, most

notably the structured, high-acid Mandilaria and supple, juicy Mavrotragano. Santorini's vineyards are peppered with characterful varieties that are often found nowhere else, though Assyrtiko has emerged as the star and rightly receives most of the attention.

Then there's Santorini's incredible history – hardly anywhere on earth has such a long track-record of making wine (over 3,500 years). There have been plenty of hiccups along the way, including various invaders, the catastrophic earthquake of 1956 and a long list of volcanic activity that includes the largest recorded eruption in human history. So immense was the explosion of 1500 BC, that it caused a tsunami big enough to wipe out the Minoan civilisation on Crete and is believed to be the inspiration for the legend of Atlantis. Yet while the eruption was bad news for the islanders back then, it has endowed Santorini with another viticultural advantage – a completely unique terroir.

“The main element that helps to distinguish Santorini's wine is the earth,” says Paris Sigalas, another of the island's most respected winemakers, referring to the mix of pumice stone, volcanic ash, sand and rock that locals call *áspa*. The soil is so hostile to organic matter that little beyond tomatoes, fava and vines can be cultivated, and Phylloxera – scourge of vineyards across



Haridimos Hatzidakis in the 'Mylos' vineyard

mineral-rich earth and electrifying energy of the volcano.

Hatzidakis does a wonderful job of capturing the essence of Santorini across his range of white wines, particularly in the rich and uncompromisingly saline 'Mylos', or oak-accented lushness of 'Louros'. While not everybody appreciates the distinctive style, he is undoubtedly attracting a cult following – and deservedly so. The wines, like the man, are big in personality and stature (“Assyrtiko needs a certain level of alcohol to release its aromatic characteristics”). 'Louros', in particular, is a candidate for being the best white wine of the Mediterranean, let alone Santorini, its power and class causing the head sommelier of a Michelin-starred restaurant to mistake it for a top Corton-Charlemagne at a recent blind-tasting in London.

Those looking for a more 'classic' take on Santorini can still find plenty to excite. At Gaia, Yiannis Paraskevolpoulos and Leon Karatsalos define the chiselled, mineral-infused style that is now the island's calling-card with 'Thalassitis', while the 'Estate' Assyrtiko by Argyros, and the PDO Santorini bottling from Sigalas deliver the same distinct saline

the world – never stood a chance. This makes Santorini one of the few regions where all the plants are own-rooted and centenarian vines come as standard (there are even stories of 500-year-old vines in some places). “The pumice stone can be found deep down in the ground; it is full of holes that keep the humidity inside,” continues Sigalas, drawing attention to another peculiarity of Santorini's terroir – that it is technically a desert, with almost all water available to the vines coming from the humidity of the atmosphere and moisture in the morning mist. Every drop counts in these harsh conditions, but it's not just thirst they have to contend with – the Meltemi wind whips across the Aegean throughout

summer and can be so fierce that it renders common vine-training methods obsolete. For millennia, the weather-beaten folk of Santorini have combatted the elements by using their own distinctive system of basket vines (called *kouloura*), to shield their grapes from the wind and trap as much moisture as possible, adding another inimitable aspect to the island's viticultural repertoire.

All of these factors – ancient own-rooted vines, nutrient-poor soil, low-to-zero rainfall and idiosyncratic training methods – lead to a maximum yield of 25hl/ha, enough to make the Bordelais and Champenois (who routinely harvest double or triple that) sob into their Hermès handkerchiefs. But the pay-off in the best wines is concentration and detail, marrying the saltiness of the sea,

The view from Venetsanos winery



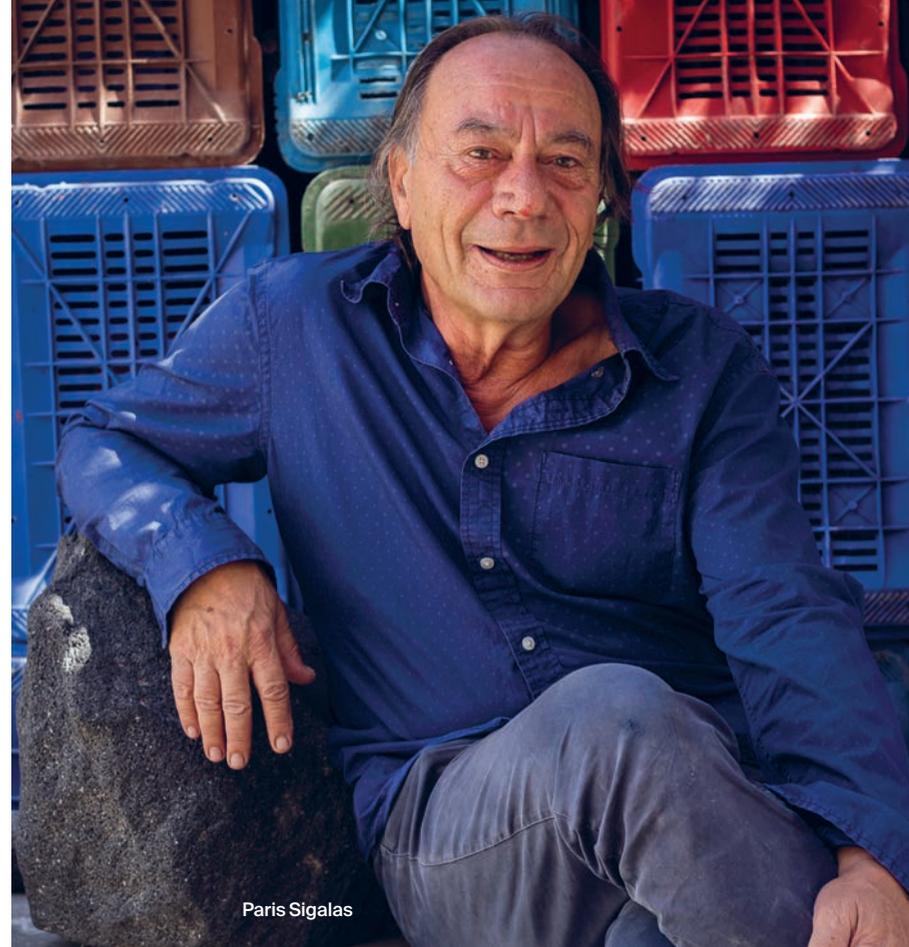
hit of volcanic rock and preserved lemon. Although these four are, justifiably, the most talked about wineries on Santorini, a handful of recent projects has brought a long overdue injection of new blood. Perhaps the most exciting is Vassaltis, where Yiannis Valambous produces precise, elegant Assyrtikos. With a *pet-nat* in production, and other exciting developments underway, this is undoubtedly an address to watch. Likewise, the renaissance at Venetsanos (the island's first 'modern' winery, built in the '40s but out of action between 1979 and 2014) is full of promise. "The thing I love most about drinking Santorini is that you can really connect the wines

with the *terroir*," says head winemaker Ioanna Vamvakouri, "and understanding the distinctive character of the different villages is the next step for the island's wines."

Ioanna is not the only one fascinated by the prospect of single-village/vineyard wines. Hatzidakis has 'Mylos' and 'Louros' in his range (both from Pyrgos) and Sigalas makes an intense single-vineyard wine from 'Kavalieros', a site in Imerovigli. Not content with that, he recently released the first vintage of his '7 Villages' project, a set of wines from the island's most distinctive terroirs all made in an identical way (fermented and matured in steel tanks, to minimise winemaking

influence). The results are fascinating, from the rich 'Akrotiri' (a hot area in the south) to the lighter, more perfumed 'Pyrgos' (the island's highest vineyard zone), or the elegant salty tang of 'Megalochori' (a well-exposed coastal site). Still, not everyone is convinced: Stefanos Georgas, head winemaker at Argyros, believes more can be achieved by blending the best of each terroir. "Single-village wines only show one face of Santorini," he says. "Pyrgos gives you something great, but what am I missing? Whatever it is, I get it from Imerovigli or Episkopi."

This tradition of blending can also be seen in Argyros' Vinsanto, the lusciously sweet dessert wine from which the



Paris Sigalas

"the weather-beaten folk of Santorini have combatted the elements by using their own distinctive system of basket vines"

200+-year-old basket vine



Vinsanto name originates (despite the Italians co-opting it). Numerous wineries make Vinsanto, but Argyros' 12 and 20-year-old bottlings are the finest – show-stopping, complex wines that should sell for ten times the price. Owner Matthew Argyros is rightly proud of his Vinsantos ("a very old tradition on the island of Santorini"), but his fondness for the local patrimony prompts apprehension about the future. "Real estate is the big enemy of the local vineyards," he laments. "We need to find a balance between development and respect for the natural landscape."

Thankfully, moves are afoot,

with talk of an application to have UNESCO world heritage status bestowed on Santorini's vineyards. They are, after all, the oldest continuously farmed viticultural sites in the world, full of indigenous varieties, cultivated with unique methods on the slopes of history's most violent volcano. If that isn't a good enough case to grant the vineyards protection, then let's hope the committee get to taste the wines – they'd be hard-pressed to find anything that better communicates the drama of where it was grown; something that is worth celebrating as much as it's worth protecting.

NOBLE ROT'S TOP 10 SANTORINI WINES

1. Argyros, Vinsanto 20 year old
2. Argyros, Vinsanto 12 year old
3. Hatzidakis, 'Assyrtiko de Louros' 2013
4. Sigalas, 'Kavalieros' 2014
5. Hatzidakis, 'Assyrtiko de Mylos' 2015
6. Argyros, 'Estate Assyrtiko' 2015
7. Gaia, 'Wild Ferment' 2015
8. Sigalas, '7 Villages: Imerovigli' 2015
9. Vassaltis, 'Barrel-Fermented Assyrtiko' 2015
10. Venetsanos, 'Nychteri' 2015