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ASSYRTIKO – FROM CALDERA TO THE CLARE

THE island of Santorini is located in the Aegean Cyclades Islands between Crete and the mainland of Greece. It's a popular holiday destination renowned, with its unique feature of being a water-filled caldera, which are the remnants of a volcano that famously erupted around 1630 BC. This eruption created the famous walls of the Caldera (Caudron) that we see today that rise to a height of 330m. The eruption buried the island in 30-40 metres of volcanic ash destroying all life. It caused a tsunami and the whole planet had a veil of very fine ash. It took 3 centuries for the island to be resettled. Today it is a busy island renowned for its whitewashed cubical houses and fabulous sunsets.

This is the setting for one of the most unique wines of the world – the Assyrtiko. What makes this white grape unique are the challenges it faces on the island. Firstly, there are no rivers or lakes on the tiny island and the vine has to survive off rainwater. That wouldn't be so bad but there is no rainfall for six months of the year, and between October and February, the annual rainfall is below 400mm and sometimes as low as 130mm. Secondly, there is a strong northerly wind called Meltemia that blows from May until September which further dries out the vine and can do damage at flowering. The soils are another challenge and consist of pumice, black lava and ash, locally called Aspa, which have no nutrients. Finally, it's hot; temperatures in summer months are generally around 25 to 29 degrees centigrade.

It is a wonder that the locals grow grapes at all. However, making wine on the island has always happened and can be traced back to ancient pre-eruption times. Grapes are a hardy crop and one of the few agricultural pursuits that can be

successfully grown in such an unforgiving environment. Both nature and the ingenuity of 'man' have combined to create an internationally renowned wine.

Nature solves the water problem. During the summer months a damp mist/sea fog covers the island in the early morning and this dew coats the vine and penetrates the soil to a depth of around 50cm. The volcanic soil acts like a sponge and holds this moisture for weeks. The vine takes moisture from the soil which helps it to survive through the dry rainless months. As a consequence, the roots are not like a normal vine and they are spread around the surface to access this moisture, rather than go deep.

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To protect the vine and grapes from the Meltemia the locals have developed a unique Amoliti pruning system which trains the vine into a basket known as a Kouloura or Ampelia shape. Basically, the vine canes are knitted together, forming a wreath within which bunches can grow. It is a very low training method, there are no wires or posts. Phylloxera cannot live in the soil on the island so the vines are on their own root system which means replanting new ones can be done by the ancient method of layering. This is where a cane is bent down and buried up to a point where they want the

new vine to grow – normally a few metres away. The new vine feeds off the mother vine until it has grown its own root system and when this has happened (normally around three to five years) the cane is dug up and cut and the new vine is set free from its mother. The baskets get renewed every 20 years but some of the roots of the vines can be up to 300 years old.

It's not known how long Assyrtiko has been grown on the island of Santorini but it could have been on the island before the eruption. It's resistant to most diseases and has high tartaric acid and a pH similar to Mosel riesling, below 3. At 12-13% alcohol it displays floral, green apple aromas with a seashell-like minerality and above that the wines have more ripe pear and apricot flavours. Due to the islands prosperity and lack of land they are the most expensive grapes in Greece.

Santorini white wines can either be 100% Assyrtiko or blend with Athiri and Aidani, two other Greek white varieties. The majority of wines are dry with high acid and a wet-stone minerally, fleshy palate. Assyrtiko takes oak well and a more richer style can use the traditional label term Nykteri (Nichter) for wines aged for at least 3 months in oak with a minimum alcohol of 13.5%.


The island also produces an excellent sweet wine called Vinsanto (note it is one word and comes from vin-wine & santo-Santorini as opposed to the holy wine of Tuscany Vin Santo) which involves sun drying the grapes for 6-14 days to dehydrate them and increase the sugar ratio. The grapes are then fermented and aged for a minimum of 2 years. Figs, fruit cake, raisins all leap out of the glass of this complex wine.

So with Assyrtiko ability to adapt to extreme climates it is not surprising to learn

we now have the first Australian examples. It has taken Clare Valley winemakers Peter and Sue Barry over six years to realise their dream of bringing Assyrtiko to Australia. They first tasted the white wine of Santorini whilst on holiday in 2006 and immediately saw the potential of the grape for their home in Clare. With the help of Athens based Konstantinos Lazarakis MW they were introduced to renowned Greek winemaker Yiannis Paraskevopoulos. Yiannis had contacts on Santorini and they travelled to Greece and took cutting from Yiannis Argyros's vineyards. Finally, the cuttings arrived in Australia and then they had to wait through the two years' mandatory quarantine before finally planting the nursery grown cuttings in 2012. The first parcel was picked from young vines in 2014 and this October sees the release of their 3rd and most commercial vintage.

Clare valley doesn't share the same climate challenges as Santorini. The Clare is a lot cooler and has higher rainfall, but Peter believes that Assyrtiko is an insurance policy for a possible decline in rainfall and a raise in temperature from the effects of global warming. His company Jim Barry have planted their vines on a 480m high south facing slope vineyard and have even used the Amoliti pruning system for some vines.

On assessing the early results Peter believes he has "reproduced some similar characteristics to the Assyrtiko of Santorini, producing a richer wine with a mineral/salty aftertaste".

I recently had the opportunity of tasting a tank sample and his Australian Assyrtiko has a new world pristineness to it and a far cry from the Caldera wines with their higher alcohol and minerality, but it still is an enjoyable drop. 



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