

Pouring the Peloponnese

On the eve of the annual New Wines of Greece tasting in Montreal, three producers show how they're putting the peninsula on the world map.

Saturday, April 21, 2018

Text & photos © Jeff Heinrich



Vineyards of Monemvasia Winery, near Velies, in Laconia in the far southeastern Peloponnese, with the sun setting over the Mediterranean beyond .

Selling the virtues of Greek wine overseas has long been a challenge, no less so since the economic crisis that engulfed the Mediterranean nation in 2009. One issue is Greece's grape varietals: they are bewildering both in their sheer number (over 300) and tongue-twisting names (Agiorgitiko, Xinomavro, Moschofilero, etc.). The other issue is lack of exposure: compared to Europe's leading wine exporters ([Italy](#), [France](#), [Spain](#)), Greece sells very little of its production ([only about 10 per cent](#)) outside its borders. To top it off, the country has a trade disadvantage abroad because its currency is still the Euro; it [can't be independently devalued](#) to help exporters sell their products more cheaply in foreign markets.

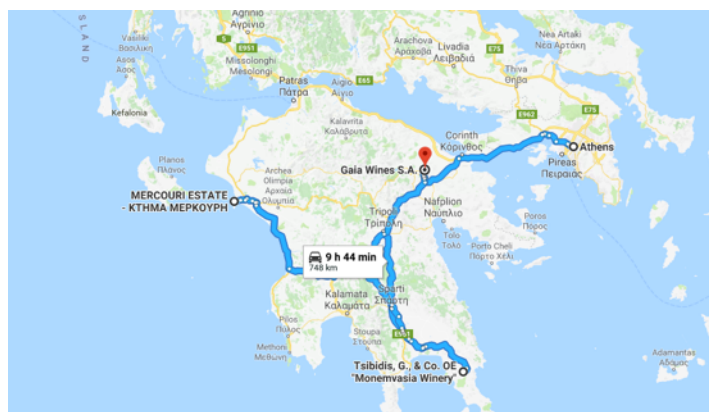
Despite all this, Greece has managed to build a name for itself in the past decade as a producer of fine wines on a par with products like Italian Barolo, French Chablis and Spanish Xeres, often at surprisingly reasonable prices. A well-coordinated [marketing push](#) in its main export markets

(Germany, the U.S. and to a lesser extent, Canada) has seen [exports rise by double digits](#) in those countries. Helping producers domestically, where they sell the most, Greece also [backtracked recently](#) on a controversial excise tax on wine it introduced in 2015, putting wine once again in a consumer-friendly niche that helps the producers' bottom line, as do continued agricultural, equipment and promotional [subsidies from the European Union](#).

Foreign revenue and exposure to new buyers abroad are key to Greece's growth in wine business and reputation as it emerges from its debt crisis. So it's no coincidence if these days in Quebec and the rest of Canada you're seeing a wider choice than ever of Greek wines on the shelves of your local liquor store. Expect to read more about them this spring, too, propelled by wine-industry events like next week's [New Wines of Greece tasting](#) at the Centre des Sciences, an annual event that brings close to 40 producers to the Old Port for a day, similar to North American blitzes this spring by wine marketers of Portugal and New Zealand. In the global game to tickle our taste buds with new product, Greece is [an old hand up to new tricks](#).

To see how they do it – and more importantly, to taste the changes – last November I took a week off and toured one of Greece's most varied, vast and dynamic wine regions, [the Peloponnese](#). It was the wrong time of year to go and visit the Greek islands (too few ferries, too cold), but very much the right time to visit the Peloponnese, not least because it is totally accessible by car from Athens, over modern superhighways through the mountains for much of the journey, and in winter isn't overrun by tourists. Post-harvest, the owners and growers and winemakers I met there also had more time on their hands to play host. As I found, the Peloponnese has it all – mountains, beaches, history, ruins, great food and wine, and of course, hospitality, always high on the agenda of any proud winemaker.

Three wineries fit the bill – all small-scale, high-quality and family-owned, each representing a distinct area of the Peloponnese. First, in the Laconian village of Velies in the far southeast, was [Monemvasia Winery](#), whose representative I'd met only a week before at the 2017 [Grande dégustation de Montréal](#) and whose excellent Malvasia dessert wine (a revival of the famous 'Malmsey' wine of yore) had surprised and charmed me. Second, up on the northwest coast near the port of Katakolo, a short drive from ancient Olympia, was the lovely [Mercuri Estate](#). And finally, back east toward Corinth in the mountains of Nemea, in the village of Koutsi, was [Gaia Wines](#), whose co-owner I'd also met before, at the 2015 edition of the New Wines of Greece event in Montreal.



The route by car: Athens-Monemvasia-Korakochori-Koutsi-Athens.

Besides a tour and tastings, all had something special to offer: an architect's view of a winery under construction at Monemvasia, a private walkthrough of the family's agricultural museum at Mercuri, a pipette of unreleased Assyritiko *vin santo* straight from the cask in the Gaia cellars.

And from everywhere came a story about how these wines came to be, where they fit in the Greek wine ecosystem, what their history is, what investments were needed to make them a reality, how they fare when exported abroad to places like Canada, how much family members contribute in time and effort to their success. Everything to explain why Greece, where wine has been made for over 6,000 years, deserves a place at the table in this, the 21st century.

Monemvasia Winery (Velies, near Monemvasia, Laconia)

After his studies in physical science and engineering, George Tsimpidis came home to Monemvasia, looking to make his mark on history.

"I finished university and decided I wanted to create something for the birth of my first child, something that would have to do with the history of this place, with the land," the owner of [Monemvasia Winery](#) recalled.

"Before, I drank, I smoked, I owned a café-bar here in Monemvasia, which is where I met my wife, then I sold everything. I had olive trees before, but I tore them out and planted vines instead. I changed my whole way of living, completely."



Elli and George Tsimpidis at one of their vineyards near Velies.



Boxes of Monemvasia wine, topped by one called 'Kastropolitia', a red blend of Agiorgitiko and Mavroudi grapes.

"I wanted to create an upscale wine, a dessert wine of a very nice quality, with condensed aromas of peach and apricot, and that would improve over time," he said over a supper of bouyiourdi (baked feta), tsaiti (cheese and spinach), dolmados, stamnagathi (wild chicory), veal burgers and rib steak.

That was 25 years ago. Tsimpidis planted 300 acres by himself, 100 in the first year, five indigenous varieties. He hoped to revive the old recipe of Malvasia sweet wine, famous in medieval times, exported around the world to royal courts between the 8th and 12th centuries.

"All the kings used to drink Malvasia. But then the Turks came and everything stopped, for four centuries." It took Tsimpidis 13 years to come up with the right recipe. His first vintage was the 2010, bottled in 2013. He has won more than 200 awards for it since.



George Tsimpidis and workers at the old winery.

"This wine matures for three years in oak barrels, which gives the vanilla and caramel flavours and a nice acidity and fresh finish. In the beginning, I didn't know what would come of it; I just wanted the best."

How is Malvasia different from a Sauternes or an old tawny port? "It's not that sweet, for one thing, especially compared to other Greek dessert wines. *Vin santo* also has nice acidity and completely different aromas; Sauternes is a lot sweeter.

His 2011 vintage is still in the barrel. "I have more than 100,000 litres of Malvasia in the winery now. I'm aging it for my children. It's their inheritance, to do with what they like. Anything is possible."



Tsimpidis shows a rock from the soil of one of his vineyards.



Tsimpidis in the driveway of his new winery, still under construction.

Tsimpidis makes all sorts of other wines, over 20, in fact, all bottled and ready to consume: 11 whites, 8 reds, a rosé from flowery Fileri grapes and fruity Agiorgitiko, a medium-sweet rosé triple blend, and a medium-sweet white from the Kydonitsa varietal.

His winery in Velies used to be a simple warehouse and was supposed to last him only a couple of years. It has lasted over 20. Now he's building a new, state-of-the-art one in a valley over the hills nearby, with his architect Marina Kalogerakou.

"Parents give all sorts of things to their children: knowledge, money," said Tsimpidis, his wife, Elli, a former primary school teacher, nodding in agreement. "I give Malvasia. It's my reason to exist."



The full range of Monemvasia Winery's products ...



... and the its award-winning Malvasia dessert wine.

Mercouri Estate (Korakochoi, near Kotakolo, Ilias)

In the waning late November sun, standing among rows of Assyritiko on an eight-hectare property recently sold to his family by the mother of Greek prime minister Konstantinos Simitis (1996-2004), Labis Kanellakopoulos shook off a bad head cold and talked about what makes [Mercouri Estate](#)'s terroir – and Greek wine in general – unique: history and climate.



Labis Kanellakopoulos at the new vineyard.

“In 1985, there were no more than 50 wineries in Greece; now there are more than 700 – the growth in production has been amazing,” said the young man, who runs the business with his brother, Dimitris, and their father, Vasilis. “Ours was one of the first small, boutique, family wineries. Before, there were a lot of big ones making cheap retsina and low-quality Nemea wines. Tourists who haven’t been back since the 1980s still think that’s all Greece has to offer in the bottle.”

Not at Mercouri Estate. It’s different, starting with its geography. The property is in a part of the Peloponnese where farming is rare, a seaside area that is more residential and touristic thanks to the nearby ports of Kotakolo, with its summertime traffic of cruise ships, and Pyrgos, the regional capital, agricultural land is hard to come by. Off and on, the Mercouri family has been making wine in the vicinity of the village of Karakochoi since 1864, nurturing a tradition originally brought from northern Italy, with offshoots of production of currants, olives and grapes.



The way they used to do it, carting the grapes by hand...

“The original Mercouri” – no relation, by the way, to the family of *Never on Sunday*'s Melina Mercouri – “came from a village up in the mountains here,” Kanellakopoulos said. “In 1821, there was the



... and crushing them with their feet.

Greek revolution against the Turks, and the period into the 1840s, with Otto, the first king of Greece, on the throne, was one of great turmoil. My ancestor, Theodore Mercouris was an anti-royalist, so he left Greece and went to Italy, where he became a cotton merchant. He settled in Friuli, in the port of Trieste, learned a bit about wine, then moved to Alexandria, in Egypt, where

he made a lot of money. He moved back to Greece in the 1860s, bought the estate in Karakochori from the Greek government and settled in with his family.”



The label for the rare bottling of Mercouri's Refosco clone.

In a microclimate where the winters are mild and wet and the summers hot and humid, temperatures drop a lot at night because of close proximity to the sea – “and that’s very good for the vines,” said Kanellakopoulos. The first plantings were made in the 1870s: Italian Refosco, a clone still cultivated to this day right outside the front door of the winery; the wine is given a limited release of 1,500 bottles every year, with an old photo of Kanellakopoulos’ three grandparents on the label. Over the subsequent years, through phylloxera plague and bankruptcy, Mercouri grew in fits and starts into a modern winery. Underground concrete tanks and French machinery were installed in the 1930s, and in the 1980s the third and fourth generations of the family turned Mercouri into a prized producer of high-quality, niche wines.

Today, five generations into the dynasty, working with some 16 varietals on as many hectares of land, the Kanellakopoulos brothers look to their

heritage (the vineyards, the family’s 19th-century Tuscan-style villa, their on-site agricultural museum) for inspiration – and to the international market for their future. First came the winery’s flagship ‘Domaine Mercouri’ red, its bottles wrapped in translucent paper as a marketing move on the first vintage and used ever since. Then came a white, ‘Foloi,’ a blend of Viognier and Roditis, an indigenous grape traditionally used to make retsina wine.



Labis Kanellakopoulos at the back of the winery.



The entrance hall where the Mercouri family welcomes visitors.

The sister wines remain the winery’s top sellers: 25 per cent of its total annual production is the red (about 40,000 bottles) and 20 per cent is the white (about 35,000). Bottlings of other varietals and blends were added slowly: every year see about 15,000 bottles each of ‘Kallisto’ (white) and ‘Antares’ (red), along with some small-scale production of two other whites, a highly aromatic rosé (‘Lampadias’), three single-varietal reds and two dessert wines.

Foreign sales are part of the push, with success in getting shelf space varying from country to country, and often widely within countries. In Canada, Quebec's SAQ monopoly carries Domaine Mercouri and Foloji in its stores, and Kallisto has been tendered and may soon be listed as well. Ontario has a few dozen bottles of Kallisto and 'Antares' (a red blend) in its LCBO stores, all in downtown Toronto. "It was really hard getting into Quebec, but the SAQ has done a really good job with us," Kanellakopoulos said. "Even if you're not seeing all the best-quality wines yet, Greek wine is starting to get recognized; some sections in the SAQ are even marked 'Greece,' not just 'Other countries', which is very important for us."



A cat roams part of the downstairs of Mercouri's agricultural museum.

Internationally, Greek winemakers are often hampered by their lack of ambition, he said. "A supermarket buyer in the U.S. took me aside once and said, 'I'll tell you what the problem with you Greeks is: When a Greek winemaker comes into my store and checks what's on the shelves, he sees the Greek section and tells me to take this wine out and that wine out and put his there instead. When an Italian winemaker comes, he doesn't go to the Italian section, he goes to the Greek section and tells me to take all their wines out and put Italian wines there!' That's thinking big. In the international market, Greeks have tended to see the enemy as other Greeks, instead of fighting for a place for all Greeks in the world."



Labis Kanellakopoulos in the Mercouri cellars.

In Canada, where the market is largely controlled by provincial monopolies, small producers like Mercouri have to deal with widely varying prospects, the result of different ways of doing business. "The SAQ is logical," Kanellakopoulos said. "They say, 'If you sell, we'll renew,' and after that, things go smoothly. At the LCBO, it might be different. Even if you sell, they might just change their mind and go with someone else instead; there isn't the same kind of continuity, and that can make things more difficult." When government wine buyers do travel to Greece to scout out good-value wines to import, they often choose sure things like the whites of Santorini, where tourism and the wine industry are already highly developed.

"Islands like Santorini come first to people's minds when they think of Greece, but they should really know about the Peloponnese," Kanellakopoulos said. "This peninsula combines everything: mountains you can ski down, beaches that rivals the Greek islands, fortress towns like Monemvasia that are simply amazing. And as a wine region, the Peloponnese is one of the most interesting in Greece. It has diversity: diversity of varieties, or vineyards, of altitudes, everything. This may actually be the problem with the

Peloponnese and its reputation for wine, because we're not associated with just one thing in people's minds. Santorini is connected to Assyritiko, Naoussa (in Macedonia, northern Greece)



Vines and trees near the sea on the Mercouri estate ...

is connected to Xinomavro, but the Peloponnese has so many varieties it's hard to connect us to any one thing."

But, he added optimistically, "I think we turn this to our advantage somehow. We Greek winemakers will find a way."

"We're not just competitors. We all struggle for the same cause, to make quality wines and make them known around the world."



... and the result, in the bottle.

Gaia Wines (Koutsi, in Nemea, Corinthia)



The early-winter view from the Gaia winery in Koutsi, across one vineyard and down the road to Nemea.

Yiannis Paraskevopoulos and his business partner, Leon Karatsalos, are Athenians, but when they decided to make wine, they put down roots in two farflung places. For their whites: the southern Aegean island of Santorini. For their reds: Nemea in the northern Peloponnese, the largest wine denomination in Greece.

Paraskevopoulos is a professor of oenology with a PhD from

Bordeaux; Karatsalos is a Thessaloniki-trained agronomist. As co-owners of [Gaia Wines](#) they have helped put 100-per-cent Greek varietals top-of-mind for international wine critics with a taste for true Mediterranean terroir.

“We believe Nemea and Santorini are the best places in Greece to do wine,” Paraskevopoulos said at his winery in the mountain village of Koutsi, seven kilometres from the sea as the bird flies. “Nemea has only a few thousand hectares of vines but there is a huge variation in altitude, from 240 metres in the valley to 500 in Koutsi to 1,000 further up top. There’s a big difference between the Agiorgitiko grown here up in the hills and what’s grown down in the valley. There have always been vineyards in the hills but in the valley they only started planting at the start of the 20th century; before that it was mainly cereals, corn, tobacco and cotton.



Yiannis Paraskevopoulos in the Gaia Wines new vineyard in Koutsi, planted around 2010.

“When we bought the vineyards here a quarter-century ago, we bought the plots with all the flaws, all the mistakes that were made over the previous 40 years. Fifteen years ago, for our best wines, we planted new plots. The old plots had 3,000 vines per hectare, the new ones double that – so, very dense – with some Agiorgitiko clones, as well. The mother soil is limestone, but the topsoil is marl, a type of clay that retains humidity so the vines grow with only moderate stress. Sometimes we irrigate, but only in small doses, a bit near the end of grapes’



Post-harvest grapes left on the vine on one of Gaia's older vineyards.

maturity when the sugars are running but the berries aren't ripe yet.”

Water is an issue, he added, “because a lot of growers around here do Thompson seedless grapes, which have a huge thirst for water. But global warming is really the root issue. We haven't felt it yet on Santorini, because of the buffer the sea provides, but here on the mainland it's fairly obvious, and annoyingly enough, it always hits us in the critical period of the month that precedes the harvest. First, it's the temperature. Day

temperatures aren't rising, but night temperatures are. The mercury doesn't drop at night, and that's why the sugars will be running like crazy but the tannins remain unripe, which is the worst thing that can happen to a winemaker for his reds.

“Secondly, we always used to have Indian summer, when the rains wouldn't appear until October, when harvest is already done. Now, the rains tend to arrive much earlier, before harvest, on a berry that's absolutely not adapted to that. It's not like in Bordeaux, where it rains every second day and the Cabernet has adopted a defence against that. Here, you might have one day of rain and the berry is gone, just like that. For instance, every third year we don't make any of our top wine, Gaia Estate, because everything has rot.”

Paraskevopoulos and his team at Gaia bottle everything they grow: about 300,000 bottles between the wineries (60 per cent in Nemea, 40 per cent on Santorini), 70 per cent for export. “Our main export market, by far, is the U.S. In Canada, we do quite well in Ontario, but not, as you might think, because of the Greek community there. We do not work with importers who are Greek, because they have a tendency to restrict our business to the Greek community. I'm not snobbish about that, but it's not real export, it's more like transport, Greeks to Greeks.”

Gaia doesn't deal much with the LCBO, either. “Our Ontario importer, Small Winemakers Collection, don't really care about listing with the LCBO. They do private orders, and it's exactly what we need, it's the profile that really works well for a small company like Gaia with a rather expensive portfolio. In Quebec, unfortunately, it's the other way around. The SAQ is quite weak when it comes to private orders, so we don't do that well in Quebec; other Greek wines are doing much better than us. Nevertheless, we can always hope that things will improve.”

From his operation in Koutsis, just down the dirt road from rival producer Semeli Wines (owned by ex-Piraeus Bank chairman Michalis Sallas), Paraskevopoulos has a fine view of distant Mount Fokas, 873 metres high, at the foot of which Gaia sources the Agiorgitiko grapes for its rosés.

"When non-Greeks think about Greece, they always think of it as a very warm place, somewhere they can go for tanning or a trip to the islands," he said. "What we never say enough is that we are an extremely mountainous country. And because of that, many of our wines have a high acidity and are quite vibrant – that's basically because of the altitude. What we lack in latitude, we gain in altitude. For instance, right here in Koutsis it gets pretty cold; in winter our vines are often under snow."

He remembers the early days of the operation, back in the late '90s. "When we first bought the plots, the vines were very low, so we installed canopies to protect from the sun and pruned very severely to reduce yield. It's really low now, only about 40 to 50 hectolitres per hectare, the same as Bordeaux." In the winery's new vineyard, planted around 2010, the opposite holds: as he explained, the arrangement is much more dense.



Vines and olive trees, side by side on Gaia land.



A view down to the sea, in late November.

The most recent plots, planted two years ago from cuttings developed in a nursery in town, "are the first clone of Agiorgitiko I've ever planted," said Paraskevopoulos. The vines produce smaller berries, and they have a thicker skin and are more aromatic, with higher acidity. "For us," he said, "the clones represent the future. It took about 10 years of experimenting with a dozen different ones and doing micro-vinifications of each, to select the one we needed."

As an educator, Paraskevopoulos understands foreigners' bewilderment

with Greece's seemingly complex wine culture, starting with Agiorgitiko, the Nemea grape which is Gaia's hallmark.

"Let me tell you one very simple thing about Greece. It sounds complicated, and sometimes you may not be able to pronounce some of our weird varieties like Agiorgitiko, but it's actually not so hard," he insisted. "Aye-yore-RIT-ico" – can you say that? Easy, right?" Then, as if to disprove his own assertion, he cautioned: "Be careful, if you don't pronounce that second 'r' you're saying 'from the north of Greece'!"

Nomenclature aside, Greece's varietals shouldn't leave any reasonable wine-lover stumped.

"Although it's based on these very strange varieties, our system has only 20 PDOs (protected designation of origin), not 300, and the beauty of that is that each one of those PDOs codes almost 100 percent on one specific Greek varietal," Paraskevopoulos said. "So when you say PDO Nemea, you mean basically 100 per cent Agiorgitiko; you can't have anything else. When you say PDO Mantinia, which is just across from us here in Koutsi, it's 100 per cent Moschofilero. Naoussa, in the north, is 100 per cent Xinomavro."

There are exceptions, he noted, like the kinds of wines that outlier producers like Mercuri Estate in the northwestern Peloponnese are making. "They are what we call a PGI (protected geographical indication); it's like IGT versus DOC, in Italy. We do that here, too, using 10 per cent syrah to make 'Gaia S', a kind of 'Super Nemea' that's still mostly Agiorgitiko. But otherwise, the Greek system is so clean. Each PDO is very different from the rest. In France, things aren't that simple: there's little difference between, say, a St-Julien AOC and a St-Estèphe AOC in Bordeaux; they're both Cabernet-Merlot blends."

By comparison, the Greek designation system is much more straightforward – and that should be easy for foreigner to figure out. "Think of us this way: Although geographically and climatically we're a bit like Tuscany – the vegetation is the same, the soil profile is quite similar, a grape like Agiorgitiko is like Sangiovese, with mid-structure, good fruit, high acidity – we here in Nemea are actually more like Piemonte in our thinking: We do one thing. Tuscany, they do everything; Piemonte, they do Nebbiolo, period. Here, it's like that: We do Agiorgitiko, period."

Do Greeks take an extra source of pride in knowing that vines have been cultivated in their motherland for thousands of years? Is this long tradition something that could be leveraged to bolster the country's claims to the superior drinkability of its wines? No, Paraskevopoulos replied. "We don't think about it much. You see, Greeks are very egocentric. When you're four, five, six years old, you're told at school, 'When we Greeks discovered philosophy and mathematics, the rest of Europe was eating roots. You are exceptional, you are God's gift to mankind' – actually the gods', plural. So egocentric."

And that extends to how Greeks feel about their wines: that they're unique. "Before they were exposed to the international market, Greeks thought they were the only ones in the world producing wines. And if there were other nations making wines, theirs were dreadful compared to ours, even though we'd never actually tasted any. Greeks are very strange animals: we're very eager to adopt anything that comes from abroad, except food and wine. When it comes to that, we become totally inflexible."



Time to taste: Paraskevopoulos watches his daughter bring bottles to the table.

Unlike the Italians and the French, who can be just as chauvinistic about their food and wine but are better at convincing the world of its value, "the Greeks are the world champions in anti-marketing," Paraskevopoulos opined.

“Our marketing skills were and remain very, very poor. We have great stories, real stories, genuine ones, but we don't have the skill in bringing those stories to the fore. Think of a place like Santorini: it's mind-blowing. The entire island is one uninterrupted vineyard; it's been like that forever. The roots of the vines that produce the Assyritiko grapes for my wine, the actual roots, are more than 400 years old. So why is it people just want to talk about the beaches?”

And with that, we repaired up to Paraskevopoulos's office for a promotional video and a tasting of half a dozen of Gaia's wines. It was the end of the day, Athens was 70 minutes away, down the hill and up the (EU-funded) toll superhighway. Paraskevopoulos had an appointment to see his eye doctor: he'd had a cataract removed the day before, and was supposed to be taking it easy. His daughter, 24, a biochemist, hovered, eager to whisk him away.

But first, a surprise.

As a parting gesture, Paraskevopoulos led the way down to the cellar, where some very old *vin santo* lay waiting to be discovered. “Come with me,” the winemaker said. “I'll give you a taste of something you'll really enjoy.”

Sounds like a good enough marketing slogan for me, in any language.



Half-a-dozen wines Gaia makes in Nemea and Santorini: two whites, a rosé and three reds, ending with its 14.5%, straight-from-the-cask 'Gaia Estate'.