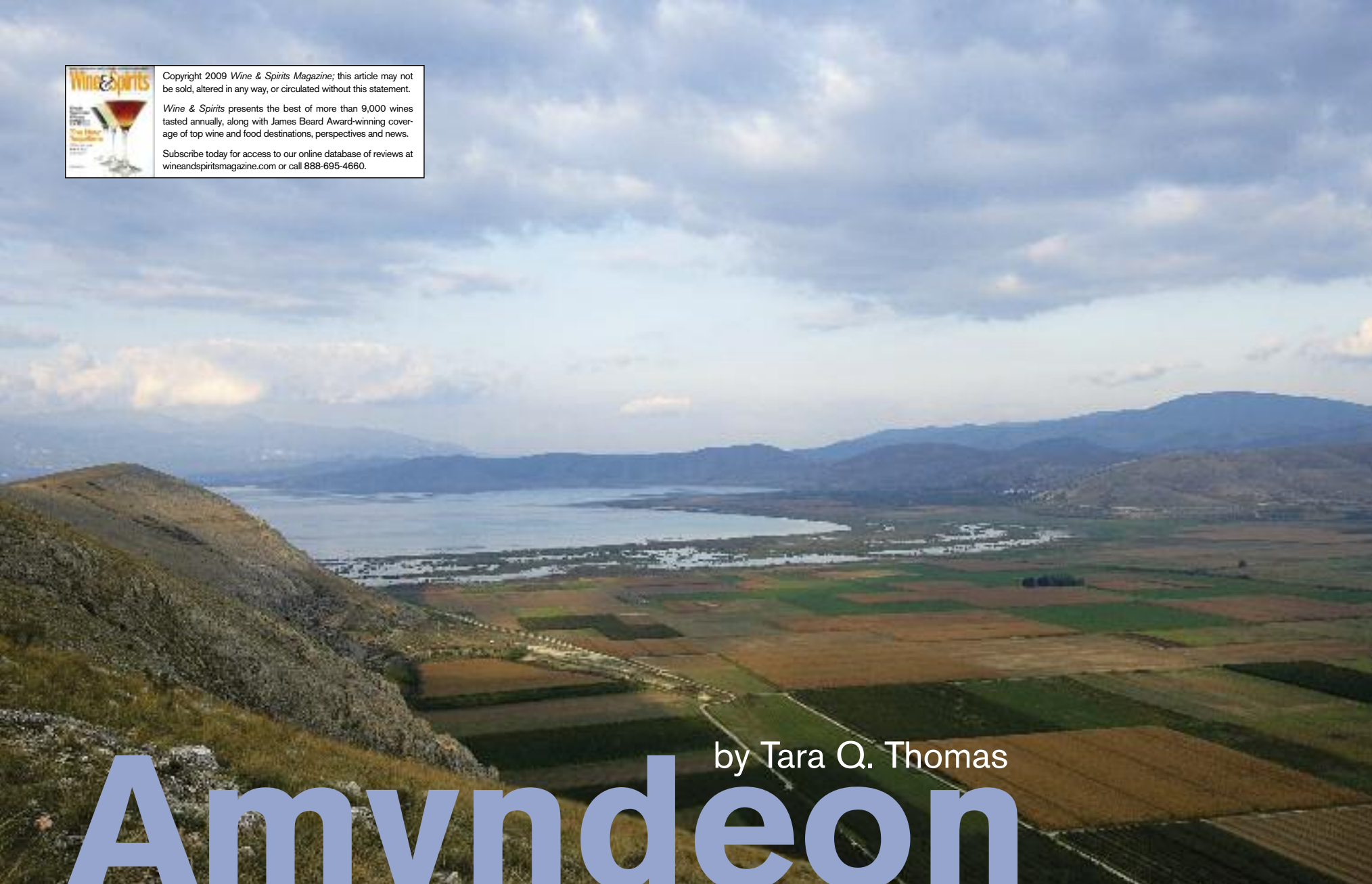


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“All the winemakers have to go to higher altitudes. We have no choice.”—Angelos Iatridis, Alpha Estate



by Tara Q. Thomas

Amyndeon

The Northern Lights of Greece

“The mountain tops catch the clouds,” Angelos Iatridis says, pointing to the dark patches in the otherwise glaringly bright sky. “Often it’s sunny here when it’s raining on the other side.” We’re standing in his vineyard in Amyndeon, not far from the border of Albania and Macedonia (FYROM) in far northwestern Greece.

Iatridis points out Mount Vermio to the east, the mountain that blocks off any influence from the Aegean, effectively dividing the Mediterranean climate on the other side and the Continental one here.

Amyndeon, in fact, is the coolest wine-growing region in Greece—and one of the hottest in terms of attracting top-notch winemakers to its vineyards. It used to be that all the action took place in Naoussa, an hour or so to the east. Now it’s here, on this cool, high plateau, where some of the most exciting winemaking in Greece is happening.

Like Naoussa, Amyndeon’s wine industry is based on the local xinomavro—only here it’s so cold the fruit struggles to reach maturity. Amyndeon’s vineyards rise from 1,870 feet—558 feet higher than Naoussa’s highest—and reach to nearly 2,500. Even in the height of summer, the average temperature is around 73°F. Add the threat of autumn rains, and it’s understandable that the locals have traditionally focused on sparkling wines or rosé—Amyndeon has the only rosé appellation in Greece.

Iatridis, who studied in Bordeaux, has made wine all over the world, and he’s worked in nearly every region of Greece through his consulting company, Ampelooeniki. He chose

Amyndeon for his own Alpha Estate because it would allow him to experiment with all sorts of grapes; for instance, he says, “I love tannat,” explaining that he’d consulted at Montus in Madiran. He also has planted sauvignon blanc, merlot and tempranillo, to name just a few imported varieties.

He saw the potential to make something out of the local xinomavro that falls between sparkling wines and the brawny, tannic reds from Naoussa. “Naoussa has less light and more heat,” he says. “[In Amyndeon,] eighty to ninety percent of the vineyards are sandy soil; this area used to be a lake. You have to dig 30 to 50 centimeters down to get to the limestone underneath.” The sand sheds water excep-

tionally well, and it allows the vines to survive ungrafted, unchallenged by phylloxera. “I have 83-year-old vines on their own roots.” Plus, he adds, the cooler temperatures are an advantage in warmer vintages. “All the winemakers have to go to higher altitudes,” he believes, given the wide weather swings brought on by climate change. “We have no choice.”

Even at this altitude, Iatridis says, “the heat waves see a huge development in the canopy, and sometimes shut down the vines, so we need irrigation.” And because of irrigation and higher temperatures, they now plant with rootstock. “We need better balance in the vines, and the grafts help achieve a better ratio of canopy to yield.” We slog through the

sandy soil, nearly as soft as a beach, to the winery, an imposing building that dominates the landscape.

Once inside, Iatridis shows off his building management system, which allows him to control temperature in every corner of the winery from his home, three hours away in Thessaloniki. He also has a Danish machine invented just two years ago that analyzes 20 different parameters of a fermenting wine in minutes as compared to the weeks it might take to send samples and receive results from a lab. “With the weather more variable from year to year,” he says, “we have to pay more attention every day. I can lose if I miss just one hour.”

In a spotless tasting room overlooking the vineyards, he's set up a tasting that ranges from a satiny sauvignon blanc to rich syrahs, a plush montepulciano, a tannic, black tannat and many vintages of Alpha Estate, the flagship blend of syrah, xinomavro and merlot. They are big wines, thick with fruit and lush with oak, more sophisticated and highly polished than anything Amyndeon has produced before. There's not a hint of underripeness; if anything, they border on overripe, as if Iatridis has found a way to concentrate the area's sun, while channeling the winds into their hidden acidity.

Alpha Estate may be the flashiest winery in Amyndeon, but it wasn't the first of the new wave. That credit goes to Yiannis Boutaris, who started buying land here in the 1980s. At that time, the grapes went to J. Boutari and Sons, the family winery he ran with his brother, Constantinos; that winery put Naoussa on the map with its elegant, long-lived xinomavro, the benchmark wine for the region.

But Boutaris's roots are in Nymfeon, a mountain village at the western end of Amyndeon, and the family has a long history with the local growers. "I still meet some old men who remember my grandfather going around the vineyards, sourcing grapes," says Stellios Boutaris, Yiannis's son. "He bought the first vineyard of one hectare, the Palpo Vineyard, in 1965, the year I was born. My father bought another four hectares in the late 1980s." When Yiannis Boutaris left the family firm in 1996, he purchased the vineyard from the company; since then, Stellios and his brother, Mihalis, have added 18 hectares to their holdings in Amyndeon, and their company, Kir-Yianni, contracts another 32 hectares of land.

To get the best out of the climate, they've planted most of the vineyards within sight of Lake Vegoritis, the largest lake in Greece at 13.5 square miles, yet even with its moderating influence, white wine varieties ripen more reliably than reds. In addition to roditis, they've planted sauvignon blanc, gewurz-



Yiannis Boutaris and his sons Stellios (l) and Mihalis

traminer and a little riesling. "Harvesting ripe grapes in late August is always better," Stellios says.

In fact, when we taste the wines with winemaker Dimitris Mansolas, it's clear whites are where it's at right now for Kir-Yianni's Amyndeon wines. The 2007 Petra, still cloudy after being pulled from the tank, redefines roditis, a white grape commonly made into light quaffing wines (or Retsina) all over Greece. This one is rich and satiny, with a waxy, slightly floral flavor yet bright acidity keeping it afloat. The Samaropetra is even better, a vibrant splash of grassy sauvignon blanc brightening the roditis, everything riding on a mineral base. And a new white, the 2008 Tesseris Limnes blend of gewurztraminer and chardonnay, is silky and elegant, light scents of roses and spice washing over the quiet fruit. It's the sort of wine that would be just as at home on my rooftop in Brooklyn as it would in a taverna in Thessaloniki, platters of little fried fish on the table.

Yet the family would never give up on xinomavro. "Xinomavro is the region's best grape when it's very good," Yiannis Boutaris tells me. When it's not, it's leafy, unforgivably

tannic, aggressively acidic, and the grape is prone to botrytis, so it can be rotten, too. "What I'm trying to do is to give the best aspect for xinomavro," he says, "and to try to introduce new combinations. This is what's thought-provoking and intriguing to me; to find out what we can do." So for Paranga, a xinomavro from Amyndeon, his team has blended in merlot and syrah to give it a richer, riper feel. The influence of the international grapes is not enough to cover up xinomavro's trademark sun-dried tomato flavor and gripping, ferrous tannins, but it is enough to make that character more approachable, and bring the wine into the 21st century.

Before Boutaris, Iatridis and other new winemakers came on the scene, local growers sent their grapes to the regional cooperative, the first winery in the region when it was founded in 1959. The co-op's biggest crop is pears, and its most important project involves potato refrigeration for the production of chips for Pepsico; the Amyndeon Winery is just a sliver of its business. Even so, it's no longer just a dropping-off place for the grapes farmers grew on the side. Last year, the winery underwent a two million euro reconstruction, and hired a new team, mostly from local talent.

"Everyone in the group is under forty," says Georgios Veranis, the co-op's director of viticulture, as he shows off the new tanks and barrel rooms. All the renovations were made without disturbing the façade of the old building. The wines also show off a parallel urge to preserve and to innovate: We start with a sparkling wine made from xinomavro, a wine the co-op invented in 1973. It's a completely different take on the tart, tannic grape, a bit of a throwback with its light, foamy texture and soft, sweet cherry flavor. Then there's Petraigi, a blend of xinomavro with sauvignon blanc, the xinomavro adding an earthy note to the white grape's bright guava flavors. When I ask

map by David Nunez



Dimitris Mansolas, Kir-Yianni

why they don't just bottle the sauvignon on its own, he looks stricken. "Everything here has xinomavro. We want to see what we can make with it. Sauvignon blanc is great here, but our goal is to find the possibilities of xinomavro."

Balance comes with the Reserve 2005, from vineyards more than 50 years old. There is no fancy winemaking here, no flashy oak; nor are

there old-fashioned light brown colors and oxidized fruit. It's just pure xinomavro, Amyndeon-style, with fine, ferrous tannins holding the light red cherry flavors firm, scents of roses accenting its ethereal feel.

Veranis believes that the potential of wines like these give people a reason to stay in Amyndeon. "I think in five to ten years

this region will be very different," he says. "The farmers are now building in their minds that they can work on their own, and they feel more of an obligation to produce good quality."

That evening, I stop in for dinner at *Kontosoros* restaurant in Xino Nero, a town not far from Agios Pantelemeion, the center of the winemaking region. It's a rustic room with heavy wooden beams but the white napkins and geometric plates signal more ambitious intentions. Classic Amyndeon cuisine and wine is more what I had in mind for my last evening in town, but as the plates begin to come out, my fears of soulless fancy food evaporate. The local beets make a great salad, deeply sweet and earthy; the region's Florina peppers—so revered they have their own AOC—spice an eggplant dip, and a pile of porcini-like mushrooms brings the scent of the nearby forest preserve inside. For research's sake, I try both an Alpha Estate sauvignon blanc and the co-op's classic Amyndeon Xinomavro. Both fit in seamlessly, the sauvignon's satiny texture buoying the earthy flavors, the xinomavro adding spice. And it's as if they grew up alongside each other. ■

In an area as fractured by war and unrest as northern Greece, the urge to return to hometowns and rebuild seems especially strong; every winemaker I met with mentioned it—and every one of them, save the cooperative guys, had gone off somewhere else first to make a living before they felt they could come back. It's the same with Yiannis Voyatzis, the chief winemaker for Boutari, who's quietly been working on his own winery in Velvendos, an area of sparkling lakes about an hour and a half south of Amyndeon and Naoussa.

I don't actually know how the landscape changed as we drove down to Velvendos because I fell asleep in the back seat; all I know is that it was hard to see when I woke up. We were driving over a causeway and the reflected light off the lake was nearly blinding. Lush, green mountains rose up on all sides. I've never been anywhere in Greece quite so verdant and wet before.

Velvendos doesn't have much to recommend it, unless you're a bird-watcher, for whom it's a paradise. And it didn't have any wine industry to speak of before Voyatzis started planting vineyards here in 1990. People grew grapes for their own use, or to sell to cooperatives. Voyatzis chose the area because it's where his family is from; he also says he wanted to do something different. "In order for a vineyard to be good," he says, "it needs to be a little bit out of the ordinary."

In many ways, the area looks like prime grape-growing territory: The vineyard slopes gently down to a lake; cool breezes blow down from the nearby mountains. Voyatzis planted xinomavro, the most popular variety in northwest Greece, as well as chardonnay, cabernet and merlot.

It's cool enough here that he has plenty of room to experiment. He tried roditis, but found it didn't do anything interesting; the judgment is

still out on assyrtiko. Malvasia, on the other hand, has done beautifully. He uses it in a blend with chardonnay and a tiny bit of roditis to come up with a honey-scented white with refreshing herbal notes—the sort of wine that is all too easy to drink.

His newest experiment is with moscomavro, which he blended with xinomavro and cabernet in 2008 to make a rosé. He's not sure this is its best use: "Moscomavro straight looks like strawberry juice, and always has low acidity, but I think it will make a great sweet, dried-grape wine."

None of the wines come across as international, most especially the estate bottling, called simply Ktima Voyatzis. Blended with small amounts of merlot and cabernet sauvignon, this is unmistakably xinomavro, with the variety's sour cherry fruit, olive and spice notes and dried rose fragrance. Then again, it's softer and gentler than the tannic, acidic wines produced up north, in Naoussa. Part of that is due to the ameliorating effects of merlot, he says, but mostly, it's the local clone. "The Velvendos clone has less compact clusters and a different shape to the grape; it gives softer, more aromatic wines with good color." Since the Naoussa clones tend to have better phenolic structure, he thinks perhaps a blend of the two could be best; he's experimenting here and in Naoussa with clonal trials.

Then he pulls out a few vintages of his tzapournakos, bottled with a funny frog-prince label. The wines share a foresty, almost smoky cherry flavor with bright herbal highlights; they are juicy and refreshing, like a Greek version of Chinon. In fact, he's recently discovered tzapournakos is cabernet franc; thus the frog-prince label. "I grew up here but in the end I'm a newcomer," he says. "I'm not someone who should pretend to be traditional."



Yiannis Voyatzis

photo of Yiannis Voyatzis by Sofia Pepera

