

VASSALTIS POST

QUARTELY EDITION

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Rising to The Challenge

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What Do Santorini, South Africa, and Japan Have in Common? - New Interns!

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Vassaltis Family Harvest Meals

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After attaining near perfection with our 2022 harvest, 2023 has been a shock with one climatic disaster after another. Winter drought and a cold spring left vines confused as to which season we were in, resulting in late budding. The first disaster of the year struck on April 22 when a massive hail storm hit both Santorini and Thirasia. Many buds on the verge of flowering (April 28 - May 10) were destroyed and both canopies and vines sustained heavy damage with 50 to 70% losses across the islands. Flowering for the buds that did survive began a week later, ending on May 10 when fruit set began.

May and June threw huge rain storms at us, further damaging the canopy and causing mildew in the vineyards, causing an additional 7-10% loss for us. Unfortunately, our weather problems did not end there as summer brought a record 15-day summer heatwave! Not even the hardy and island-bred Assyrtiko was able to stand up to the punishing temperatures. Grapes began losing acidity rapidly during this critical ripening period. In the end, the heat was so severe that grapes not only lost acidity but were never able to fully develop sugars.



For the last three years, Vassaltis was blessed with excellent harvests compared to this year's 55,000 kilos, nearly 60% less than our harvest last year! And yet. Despite the massive climatic issues to which our vineyards were subjected this year and the small harvest, the fruit we did get is already showing major promise in the winery.

“Low yield, low sugars, low acidity, high morale” - Yannis Papaeconomou, Vassaltis oenologist

We choose to make wine in such a unique and marginal appellation not because it is easy, and not because we're masochists, but because of the beauty we can find in our wines despite whatever challenge is thrown at us. This year tested all of us at Vassaltis, including our vines on Santorini and Thirasia. But it is times like this that validate our decision to embark on such an aggressive planting program and to create a new way to train Assyrtiko vines to better address destructive weather.

Wines at Vassaltis and across the island will be scarce this year as no one escaped this vintage with a large harvest. While quantity will be low, the quality will not deviate from that which people have come to expect from Vassaltis. Harvests like this especially show off the skill of our entire team, in particular our winemaker, proving the consistency of Assyrtiko, Santorini, and Vassaltis. ●

What Do Santorini, South Africa, and Japan Have in Common?

- *New Interns!*



Vassaltis Vineyards was so pleased to welcome our second group of interns for the harvest season! Last year, Lehandri Bothma and Gwendeli Marais joined us from Stellenbosch, South Africa. This year, we were joined by Keji (Cage) Sato and Stephanus (Naudé) Van der Merwe. Both men also joined us through a South African connection, but with very different backgrounds. Keji hails from Japan but makes wine in South Africa's Swartland under his

own label Cage Wine. Naudé was born in South Africa, but his usual winemaking grounds are in New Zealand.

Keji came to us with a slight advantage over Naudé, having both been to Greece a few times previously and knowing a little about Greek wine thanks to Tokyo's great wine scene. It was, however, the first trip to Santorini for both men. Naudé came to us through our friend, Ian Naudé,

but Keji's connection was a little different! Last spring, Yiannis P spent a month in South Africa during harvest last February and when he visited Swartland, Keji says he begged him for an internship spot! "Of course he is a legendary winemaker, as you know!!"

While no harvest on Santorini, especially this year's, is ever easy, it was a breeze for Keji. The climate, quickness of the harvest, challenges of working with old, difficult to harvest vines are all similar to the conditions he works under in Swartland. But for Naudé's, it was a huge change of pace! "Going from a big intake coming to a small winery that concentrates on the quality was truly an amazing experience and a massive learning curve for me." Regardless, both are looking forward to the chance to return to Santorini to drink some of the 2023 wines they had a hand in making. Keji especially would love to try the 2023 Aidani. Yes, Assyrtiko is amazing (especially ours!) and sings the song of Santorini, but the island is capable of much more, and with all the Assyrtiko available, Keji felt that our Aidani really stood out as something new the island can offer.

We asked our new friends what they, as fellow wine professionals with such different backgrounds, see as the future for Greek wine and how it can position itself better to gain more international attention. Naudé sees great promise in the new, younger generation of winemakers but both he and Keji agree that the key is communication and interaction with consumers and importers.

Both interns enjoyed their time on Santorini; as well as the chance to work with Yianni and benefit from his deep understanding of the island and talent for crafting such high-quality wine. Santorini is, as Keji said, "...one of the best places to be for winemakers!!!" We look forward to seeing everything that Keji and Naudé do after they return home, and hope to welcome them back to Vassaltis Vineyards soon! ●

Vassaltis Family Harvest Meals



In a private cellar, wines that the interns brought from their country, or wines that a producer sent as a gift to one of the Yannis. Many times the wines are new to most of us and we want to discuss them. It's super interesting because we have the chance to taste the wines in a casual setting with different people. We talk about where the wines are from, what techniques were used to make them, how they taste and how we feel about them, and sometimes even how well (or not!) they went with the lunch.

Everyone is tired and hungry but the vibe creates a feeling of unity. There is laughter and we all get some relief from harvest and everyday stresses.

Our lunches last at most 60 minutes and after everyone goes back to work happy, relaxed, and full! ●

Harvest is an immensely important time at every winery. It is not only about bringing in the grapes and starting the process of making new wines but also means gathering together as a family.

Everyday during the harvest period, we gather around the table in front of the production entrance, around 14:30. It is not a fancy table, but one we cobbled together. It is actually the same place where we hold all the harvest meetings. Both Yannis Valambous and Yannis Papaeconomou sit there with the vine growers when they come to say hello. And it is at this table where the workers sit to have a beer and regroup when they come back from harvesting a field before moving onto the next one.

Each chair is different. While we did not purposely choose seats at random, for me, the whole heteroclitico (diverse) and 'thrown-together' picture represents the diversity of people here, the moments we experience together, and the casual style and the simplicity of the winery.

Someone from the team goes around the winery to the staff kitchen door and returns with a huge casserole pot, a big loaf of bread, and some feta. Usually, we try to guess what is in the pot and most of the time Thanasis, who is in charge of our workers, lies about it. Every morning, he passes through the kitchen to ask the chef for our menu, so he knows first but likes to tease us.

While food is being fetched, the rest of us set the table.

Everyone starts to trickle toward the table including the interns; Yannis P (always the last to sit after checking on progress at the the pressing machine, the tanks, etc); Yannis V most of the time is there, dressed casually and cracking jokes; our cat Vassanos is around; Kiriaki leaves her desk and the harvest invoices to join us; and Maria usually leaves Athens to join us on the island for harvest period as well. If some of the vine workers are back from the fields, they join us too. The funniest person is Thanasis. He sits in the same spot every year and usually drinks beer or tsipouro from a plastic bottle. He can't eat if we don't have bread and always eats fast - two servings of course!

We're all hungry but these meals are about more than eating. This is the time when we are all together in Santorini and we talk as much as we eat! Discussions can vary from harvest issues to gossip about what's going on in our lives, to songs...to everything. The food usually is typical Greek: lentils, peas with tomato, Bolognese, brian (greens stewed with tomato), chicken with potatoes...simple but tasty and homely types of food. Ilias always brings the feta!

Of course being in a winery, wine does take center stage. Rarely Vassaltis wines, but more usually wines from the Yannis V and/or Yannis



Finding the Best Expression of Mavrotragano



Most people don't think about Mavrotragano when they think about Santorini wine. Assyrtiko usually comes to mind first and then maybe Aidani. But Mavrotragano? This tannic, deeply colored black grape does not carry the same Aegean island cache that the island's white grapes do. But for us at Vassaltis, it is important that we represent the whole of the island's varieties, not just the most popular. Mavrotragano is therefore an integral part of our wine list.

That said, we have had some ups and downs trying to find the right expression for this grape. Mavrotragano can be a difficult grape. The tannins often present as tough and grainy. It develops sugar much faster than it does phenolics meaning that one must often sacrifice acidity to allow the berries to develop their full flavor spectrum. This results in high alcohol wines which can make it difficult to pair with food, especially with island cuisine!

In the past, we harvested Mavrotragano from our vineyards based on their sugar levels. The assumption was that a higher alcohol wine would present riper flavors, smoother tannins, and more texture. While delicious, we did not feel that the resulting wines represented either Vassaltis or Santorini. So we made a change.

Now we harvest the grapes according to our taste. What does that mean practically? Firstly, we taste the grapes a lot more and pick our Mavrotragano earlier than we used to, by several weeks. We also often pick plots more than once to get individual bunches at optimal taste levels. In doing so, we no longer have to sacrifice acidity levels for phenolics. Our wines have gone from being heavy and jammy with alcohol as high as 15% to smooth and elegant wines that sing with bright acidity, and that have alcohol levels as low as 12%!

Our unique approach with this grape is another thing that makes our Mavrotragano special. After the grapes come into the winery from the vineyards, we first tread whole clusters by foot. Keeping everything sterile of course! We then transfer the must to a tank for whole cluster maceration and fermentation on indigenous yeasts followed by 12 months in oak barrels to help round out the oftentimes gritty tannins.

2023 was a difficult grape growing year with disappointing low yields at harvest, but it was a great year for our Mavrotragano! While the wine is still forming in the cellar now, we can already tell that it will achieve the trifecta of beautifully representing the variety, the island, and Vassaltis. That wine is just beginning its journey, but our 2021 Mavrotragano will be ready for you this April. ●



Exploring Thirasia



August 21st would be another normal harvest day (if there is one!) to an outsider, but for us it was special. To understand why, one would have to travel back in time, to 2019. Then, with another miniscule harvest under our belt, we realized that for our vision to become reality, Vassaltis would have to actively pursue the creation of new vineyards. Over the past decade, the explosive growth in tourism led to people abandoning their vineyards for more lucrative employment in the tourism sector. Along with a few dry years, the result has been a big drop in average crop yields and increase in prices. It was evident therefore, that we had to secure long-term, high quality grape supply in order to continue to craft the wines we do.

One of the first opportunities that came our way was to lease 4 plots with a total surface of 8ha, which we did immediately and set out to plant them. We soon discovered how naïve we were about the difficulty of planting in Thirasia. It may only be a 5 minute boat ride away but the infrastructure is nonexistent. With no hardware store, gas station or agricultural supplies, we had to secure even the tiniest piece of equipment from Santorini before crossing. And once we had

crossed no one could guarantee things would run smoothly forcing us to have a plan B, C and D.

And even once he had accounted for everything and we felt pretty confident (and slightly proud!) disaster loomed around the corner. With Covid-19 lockdowns coming into effect in March 2020, our new plantings could not be looked after, leaving them at God's mercy. With a population of 120 people comprised mostly of elderly, the spread of the pandemic to Thirasia would have disastrous effects. We weren't able to prune, water, weed or plough the land just days after we had completed a significant investment. Thankfully, we resorted to local workers who under our instructions looked after the newly planted vines.

During the years that followed, we worked passionately to see our dream materialize. A model vineyard, of 100% Assyrtiko, planted in rows, irrigated and trellised that would deliver healthy yields of clean fruit suitable for the world class wines we aim to create. And so, the day the dream materialized was August 21st. A crop of 2tn was the inaugural one. Small in quantity but

big in significance. Of course, we look forward to seeing this quantity grow north of 20tn as the vineyards mature to reach the island's averages.

Having endured the pain, and acquired significant know how, we are keeping our eyes peeled for more opportunities on the island which we believe will be the up and coming sub appellation of Santorini. ●

