

## **Greek Varieties in South Africa; Missing, and Missing a Trick**

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www.wine.co.za 21<sup>st</sup> September 2017

Certain grape varieties are permitted for use in wine production in South Africa. They come from around the world and are thought to work well in this climate. There are 101 of these. Then there those thought to perform best and permitted as Wines of Origin, there are nearly 90 of these.

They include, along with favourites such as Chardonnay and Shiraz such familiar tipples as Theron, Olasz, Erlihane, Grachen and Cornifesto. Exactly, hardly household names.

Many varieties, including those above, almost fail to register on the SAWIS list of plantings, less even than Bastardo (yes, you read right) with a whole 0.3 of a hectare, so if they exist at all it must be the size of a back garden swimming pool.

Of course, it is good to have them approved, if only for possible future use and you never know when tastes or circumstances will change. Producers are always looking to renew interest or offer something different. Look at the advances of Bukkeraube, Roussanne and Gruner Veltliner. They wouldn't be on the shelves if they hadn't got WO approval.

Variety is good and it's great to be able to offer Chenel, Mourisco and Donzellinho (both Castillo and Gallego of course), but maybe there are others that would be of more use.

We have varieties from France, Italy, Spain, Austria, Germany, Portugal, Hungary and even Croatia, but only two from a country making excellent wines in warm conditions: Greece. Suprising, really, as Vinpro reported Vititec's research in 2016 concluding, 'Mediterranean cultivars could be the answer to adapting to changes in the weather'.

Muscat, in its various forms, is here, yes, and 2.5 hectares of Agiorgitiko (81<sup>st</sup> of 106 varieties planted). Ok, so we are spectacular with Muscat, dry or sweet, but why nothing else from a country that regularly wins Golds in international competitions with wines from Assyritiko, Xinomavro and Mavrodaphne? They even sound wonderful.

It can't be terroir that makes them unsuitable, nearly all prefer Mountain footslopes, infertile soil and warm, dry summers – sound familiar? Assyritiko thrives on Volcanic debris, but maybe our sandstone on granite and shale might suit.

Might it be that the varietal names are too difficult to pronounce, or intimidating?

Perhaps they don't suit our tastes, maybe the South African consumer wouldn't like them, you may say. Hardly likely, years ago they might have been a localized taste, heavily oaked, slightly 'Bretty' reds and oak aged, slightly oxidized whites, but not anymore. Winemaking is as modern as anywhere, there has been huge investment and advances in temperature control, hygiene and shorter aging periods. Modern wines are clean, vibrant and full of character and prove that we are indeed missing something interesting. Alfega International, in Sandton, distributes some Greek wines in South Africa, three varietals (not counting the hugely successful Retsina) of which Agiogitiko sells best, mostly to the on-trade (Greek restaurants), but also to Tops at Spar. A consistent, but small market.

Assyritiko would do well here, it has the tangy citrus bite of young Chenin and the flinty nose of a cool climate unoaked Chardonnay. In our climate it could be full-bodied, quite rich and with MLF might be a match for Gewurtz and Viognier. Perfect for the variations our winemakers like to offer, from firm fresh and zesty, to rich lush and tropical.

Agiogitiko is a big red wine, medium bodied, takes to oak, and with a firm backbone yet capable of softish tannins, perfect for easy drinking when young. It needs harnessing to be its best, and it needs a cool site – think the new Cape Town District, Elim or Walker Bay - and a watchful viticulturist, but if done well can be a plum based spicy mouthfiller; and it blends with Cabernet nicely.

A less fleshy version is Aglianico, another big wine, and a competition veteran - especially from the region of Taurasi - it offers complex dark berry flavours, again likes a bit of new wood, and also a sunny climate.

Knowing the SA penchant for a bit of sweetness in wine, Mavrodaphne could offer a red with such a tendency, but the last obvious contender is Xinomavro. This has everything we might like; good depth, spicy dark berry hedgerow fruit nose and structure to last for decades, but as 'newwinesofgreece.com' says, 'It's not fruity and sweet, nor soft and round. In its most substantial forms, it's not a wine for beginners to Greek wines, nor wine period, for that matter'. For those who want something more serious, then, Barolo or Chianti fans for instance, Xinomavro provides the challenge.

Is there a viticultural reason why these varieties are absent from SA? Stratos Bobotsis, owner of Alfega, believes terroir is the reason. Like Greek Feta, Stratos believes Greek varietals are so indigenous they won't perform as well elsewhere. Greek varietals here will be shadows of their Greek counterparts, but that isn't confirmed by Cabernet, or Sauvignon, or Pinot Noir, or.... Is there another reason? Perhaps it is as simple as 'why would we want more varieties if we can't sell what we have?' Whatever, it seems a

potential producer point of difference – or at least the opportunity to broaden our drinking palates – may be passing us by.