

## Ancient Greece

Wine has been an important part of Greek culture for over 4000 years as the numerous archeological discoveries throughout Greece have revealed. The ancient Greeks knew well the nutritional value of wine as it became an inseparable part of their daily regimen. Wine also played an important role in the evolution of the local economy.

For the ancient Greeks the culture of wine was embodied in the deity, Dionysus. The son of Zeus and Semeli, Dionysus was one of the most worshiped of the Greek Gods inspiring artists, philosophers and the lives of everyday people. Many festivities were held in honor of Dionysus. A celebration of wine known as "Anthestiria" or "the festival of flowers" was popular and probably derived its name from the fact that ancient Greek wines were famous for their flower aromas. The Anthestiria took place in February when the jars of fermenting wine were ready to open. Another popular event was the grand celebration known as "Dionysia" that took place in Athens every March. In addition to welcoming the spring season Dionysia is also thought to have followed in the Babylonian tradition of celebrating the New Year in March. The remarkable theater of Dionysus located below the Parthenon is a clear testament to the strong influence of this God in the "everyday life" of the Greeks.

The Ancient Greeks loved to organize intellectual gatherings called "symposia" where they would eat and talk about predetermined philosophical subjects while drinking wine. While moderation was strictly adhered to, the Greeks would utilize the beneficial effects of wine to help achieve greater intellectual clarity and spiritual awareness. Wine was always diluted with water before drinking in a vase called "kratiras," derived from the Greek word krasis, meaning the mixture of wine and water. The word Krasis is now currently used in the Greek language as the term for wine.

The first traces of wine production in Greece were found on the island of Crete, in the middle of the 3rd century BC. Many fascinating insights into the culture of wine were discovered in the Minoan village of Myrtos near Ierapetra. Several clay wine presses, wine cups, amphorae and wine seeds were discovered throughout the island of Crete and brought to light the important role that wine has played in Greek culture since these ancient times. Discoveries of tombs in Crete that date

from between 3000-2000 BC portray replicas of winepresses and possibly the oldest winepress in the world was found in the ruins of Vathypetro near the village of Archanes. Some of the most astonishing discoveries are the numerous well-preserved wine vessels found in the storage houses of King Minos' palace in Knossos. The sudden disappearance of any trace of the Minoan Civilization circa 1600 BC is believed to be associated with the huge volcanic explosion on the neighboring Aegean Island of Santorini.

The Mycenaean civilization centered in the Peloponnese of the Greek mainland existed from 1600-1100 BC and was the next important Greek civilization to follow the Minoan Period.

Among the many archeological discoveries found were beautiful wine goblets made from gold and silver, strong evidence that the ancient Mycenaeans were not only well-trained warriors but also a highly sophisticated people who appreciated good wine and treated it with respect.

Amongst these discoveries was the famed golden cup of King Nestor found by Schliemann in the Mycenaean tomb first mentioned by Homer in the 'Iliad'. It was during the Mycenaean Era that the legendary Trojan War took place. Thanks to Homer, precious insights into the life and customs of our Greek ancestors were preserved. Homer's references to wine were so significant that the Latin poet Virgil years later called him *Vinosus Homerus*.

The Greeks traded their wines throughout the ancient world by ship inside sealed amphorae. The first evidence of this was given by Homer. The wine amphorae were tall and pointed at the base allowing for efficient storage and transportation. This system enhanced the equilibrium of the ship and allowed for greater quantities of wine to be transported. Each city-state used a different style of amphorae allowing us to determine the largest wine trading centers in ancient Greece.

We have learned from the archeologists which areas of Greece were popular for their wines such as the islands of Chios, Lemnos, Lesbos, Rhodes and Crete as well as Thrace and Macedonia on the mainland. Evidence from numerous shipwrecks tells us that Greek wine was traded throughout the known ancient world. Homer sings the praises of Greek wine cellars outside Troy that were full of wines, brought by ships mainly from the island of Lemnos. Homer also noted that wine was a valuable commercial product used to barter for needed metals, leather and even slaves. The

Greek wine trade was organized and sophisticated and was one of the methods the Greeks used to spread their culture throughout the ancient world. The islands of the Aegean Sea were so famous throughout the ancient world for the quality of their wine that Homer referred to the Aegean as the "Wine-dark Sea".

The Greeks also realized the important influence of local ecosystems on the characteristics of wine and were the first to create their own Appellations of Origin. Some of the most famous wines to be traded with their Appellations of Origin were Arioussios Oinos from the island of Chios, Thasos from Northern Greece, Mendeous Oinos from Mende of Chalkidiki and Maronian from Thasos. The system of different Appellations of Origin was taken very seriously and strong penalties were imposed on violators of these laws in order to ensure the authenticity of these wines.

The Greeks introduced winemaking techniques to their colonies in Italy and Sicily around the 8th century BC and later in France and Spain. The Italian grapes such as Aglianico, Aleatico, Greco di Tufo, Malvasiadi Candia, Malvasia Bianca, Moscato and Moscatelli are all of Greek origin. During the "Golden Age" of Greece, circa 500-300BC, when Athens ruled the ancient world, the wine trade continued to expand in importance spreading into Northern Europe and the areas surrounding the Black Sea. During Alexander the Great's conquests winemaking was introduced far into the Asian Continent.

As the Romans came into power in the ancient world, the wine trade moved from the northern Aegean to the south and was concentrated primarily on the islands of Crete and Rhodes. It was during the 1st century BC that "golden years" of Cretan viticulture began. Amphorae from this period in Crete have been found in Lyon-France, Switzerland and many villages in Italy including Pompey. The trading of vine cuttings is also known to have grown in importance, spreading the indigenous Greek grape varieties throughout the ancient world.

## Byzantine Era

During the Byzantine years the viticultural tradition continued to flourish in the ancient winemaking regions of Greece.

Orthodox Christianity was closely associated with the consumption of wine. During the religious ceremonies wine was actually believed to become transformed into the blood of Christ. "Ego eimi I ampelos" meaning "I am the vine" is one of

numerous religious wine references to Christ found in ancient frescos and religious icons. Impressive Byzantine wine goblets have been found in many archeological ruins. The Christians forbade the worship of the pagan God, Dionysus, but the inclusion of wine in Christian religious worship followed the same path as those in ancient times. The Byzantine Greeks compared their kingdom to a protected vineyard and their capital, Constantinople, was known to the Anglo-Saxons as Winbourg meaning the "city of wine".

During the crusades many Europeans were first introduced to Greek wines. The Europeans favored the Muscat wines, considered the finest of all the wines and reserved primarily for the wealthy nobles. The Muscat wines eventually appeared in southern France during the 13th century. During this time the more popular wine producing areas of Greece were Crete, Cyprus, Lesbos, Samos, Evoia and the Peloponnese.

The deterioration of the viticultural tradition in Greece followed the decline of the Byzantine Period. The winemaking tradition was carried on in the local monasteries. Winemaking was an essential element of the monk's regimen and they were known to take extra care with their viticultural lands. The end of Byzantium brought on difficult times for farmers who were often forced to sell their land to local monasteries, which were often wealthy enough to possess the latest in winemaking technology.

Between the 13th and 16th centuries AD, many regions of Greece were occupied by various western European Countries. During these years the wine of Malvasia became popular.

Malvasia or Malvoise was the European translation for the medieval fortress of Monemvassia located on the southern edge of the Peloponnese. From the harbor of Monemvassia a delicious dessert wine of the same name was exported that was in great demand during the years the Venetians ruled the Mediterranean wine trade.

During the rule of the Ottoman Empire the Turks occupied Monemvassia forcing the Venetians to relocate their production of precious Malvasia wines to the island of Crete.

The Venetians continued to produce Malvasia for 300 more years until Crete eventually came under the Turkish occupation. The Venetians finally brought the vines to Italy where they started producing Malvasia on their own soil.

Therefore the origin of the Italian grapes called Malvasia di Candia, Malvasia Bianca and Malvasia Nera is from Monemvasia via Crete.

The Vinsanto wines of Santorini were also popular during this time. Vinsanto is a naturally sweet wine traditionally made on the island of Santorini since ancient times. The grapes were allowed to dry in the sun and from this process derived their name Liasta from the Greek word "helios" meaning sun.

During Venetian control of trade in the Cyclades Islands, their ships would often make special stops at the port of Santorini to pick up the delicious dessert wines produced there. The Venetians referred to these wines as Santo or Vino Santo after the Island of Santorini. These famous Vinsanto wines were sent to Crete, other Cyclades islands, Constantinople, Asia Minor and even Russia. When France came to dominate the trade in the Cyclades the Venetians began producing Vino Santo on their own soil, a tradition that continues to this day.

## Ottoman Empire

During the Turkish occupation of Greece, which lasted for over 400 years, the Turks discouraged winemaking and its consumption. The Turks levied high taxes on wine farmers who could not handle the burden and forced many to abandon their vineyards. During this time wine was produced in the regions surrounding monasteries or in places that were under the influence of the Venetians like Santorini and Crete. During the Turkish occupation the monasteries enjoyed tax-free privileges, usually at the farmer's expense. Allowing them a better opportunity to carry on the winemaking tradition.

Many of the islands were able to produce wines since the Turks often avoided settling permanently in these areas. The mountainous regions were difficult areas for the Turkish army to control allowing wine production to continue in these areas as well.

## Greek Independence

Towards the end of Turkish occupation the taxes imposed on farmers had become prohibitive to wine production and many vineyards were abandoned. The Greeks declared their independence from the Turks on March 25, 1821. During their retreat from Greece the Turks burned many farms and vineyards, although almost 20% of the land of the newly established Greece was still covered with vines. The

boundaries of Greece at this time included the Peloponnese, Sterea Ellada, the Cyclades, Evoia and the islands of Sporades and Argosaronikos. These first years of liberation from the Turks found the country and its people in a severely weakened state.

By 1836 the Ionian Islands off the west coast of Greece had developed monopoly control of the world's supply of currants which represented 3% of the total vine cultivation in Greece at the time. In the following years the region of Peloponnese also became seriously involved with the cultivation of Korinthiaki currants which raised the total production of vines dedicated to currants up to 23% over the next 25 years. Because of the profits made from currants many farmers began replacing their wine producing vines with black currants also known as "black or dark beauties".

During these years the demand for currants had increased dramatically and many farmers quickly became rich. During the 1870s the French vineyards were attacked by the devastating Phylloxera, an insect that attacks and destroys the roots of the vines. The French were forced to import huge quantities of currants to increase their own wine production and strengthen their wines. The Greek farmers continued to replace their winemaking vineyards with raisin grapes. By 1883 the French vineyards had recovered from the Phylloxera blight and the French government imposed duties on imported currants to discourage imports and protect their own vineyards. The beginning of the 1900s saw the Greek market for currants collapse forcing many families into bankruptcy. The farmers eventually began to replant vines and produce wine again.

Before the winemaking industry could recover a series of wars began that would last through the middle of the 20th Century further restricting the recovery of the Greek wine industry.

First came the Balkan Wars, then 2 World Wars and finally the Greek Civil War from 1947-49 prohibiting the recovery of wine production. A strong wave of emigration that began during the early 1900s and continued throughout the century also contributed to the abandonment of large viticultural areas. In addition in 1898 the Macedonian vineyards were completely destroyed by the Phylloxera which also ravaged many of the other winemaking regions of Greece.

For most of the 20th century the *Greek wine industry* focused on the production of inexpensive table wines mostly exported in bulk. For many years the local consumers only had access to unregulated bulk wines, usually right from the barrel and therefore did not develop an appreciation for the better quality bottled wines. Retsina became the most popular of *Greek wines*.

Source: *All about Greek Wine* <sup>™</sup>