

July, 2018

Tim's Wine Market



Many of my write-ups for wines from Western Europe begin with a reference to their origination by the Romans, or sometimes if they are really old places, the Phoenicians. But what about wine before those two early empires? This month we will examine wines from two of the oldest wine growing regions in human history, Macedonia and Crete.

As far back as 3500 years ago, the wines from these areas were highly acclaimed, written about by Homer, and being shipped as far west as Egypt. They remained important wine regions even during Roman rule, with the quality considered superior to those produced on the Italian peninsula. Sadly the production in these regions dropped after the fall of Rome, then virtually died under periodic Ottoman rule through the second millennium. Since the end of the World Wars, both regions have again become major wine producing regions again, but producing very little of export quality. Now we are starting to see younger winemakers, backed by a couple of generations of financial support, starting to elevate quality. This month I have chosen two wines that will demonstrate to you that these regions are not only viable in the modern wine world, but offer exceptional value.

2015 Domaine Douloufakis Liatiko "Dafnios" (\$17)

I have been dabbling in Greek wines for about a decade, but had not tasted a wine from Crete until this one. This large island forms something of the southern border of the country, and is also the warmest growing region due to its Mediterranean climate. There is evidence of winemaking on the island of Crete dating back 4000 years, established by the Minoan culture that thrived until roughly 1100 B.C. Jumping forward three thousand years, the island was liberated from Ottoman rule in the late 19th century. At that point the government incentivized farmers to return to wine production. The island was then annexed by Greece in 1913, but due to the World Wars, very little progress was made in export quality wine production until the 1950's.

Most of the wine production on the island is red wine, based on the grape varieties Kotsifali and Mandilaria. They are typically blended together to create a sweet, spicy red wine that is consumed locally, but rarely exported. The most promising variety on the island is Liatiko, which, as you will see, produces a wine similar to American Pinot Noir in weight, but with a definitive spicy quality that is quite interesting. This variety thrives in the higher elevation locations, where the cooler temperatures allow the grapes to retain more acidity.

The example I have chosen come from Domaine Douloufakis, started in 1930 by Dimitris Douloufakis, was one of the first commercial wineries on the island of Crete. For three generations they have been the standard bearer for quality on the island, today farming more than 70 acres, all of which are certified organic. Today the domaine is run by Dimitris' grandson, Nikolas, who follows his grandfather's traditional methods, but in a brand new, modern winery.

To make this wine Nickolas uses only Liatiko grapes, which grow in the Protected Designation of Origin of Dafnios, which is similar to a French Appellation d'Origine Protégée. In the case of this wine, the vines grow at almost 1800 feet above sea level, in some of the highest vineyards on the island. These conditions provide plenty of sun, but also cool afternoon breezes, so there is plenty of natural acidity. The grapes are hand harvested and fermented on the skins for seven days, then racked to French oak barrels, where it ages for nine months.

When you are ready to serve this wine, I strongly recommend decanting it for a few minutes, then pour it back into the bottle and give it a light chill, say down to 60-65 degrees. Then when you pour a glass it will positively explode with a very exotic bouquet of rose petals, fresh strawberries, cooked cranberries, red licorice, apple peels and fresh harvested chanterelle mushrooms. The feel on the palate is surprisingly grippy, with obvious tannins and acidity popping up quickly to frame the fruit. I suggest serving this wine with food, but lighter, picnic type fare such as grilled chicken legs, marinated in Greek salad dressing, or broiled fish.

2016 Macedon Cabernet France (\$18)

A few years ago I featured the Pinot Noir from this winery, and it became a runaway success in the Orlando store. In April I tasted this Cabernet Franc for the first time and quickly decided that another feature was warranted. Although not a traditional variety for the region, this wine shows that Greece, and in this case neighboring Macedonia, are also capable of producing incredible wines from international varieties as well.

History buffs will recognize Macedonia, as the birthplace of Alexander the Great. It is also considered the birthplace of modern wine in Europe due to its geographical location. The Tikves valley, where this winery is situated, is at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, and it is here that scientists believe the first grape vines carried from Mesopotamia were planted.

The Tikves valley, located two hours north by car from Athens, Greece, is an interesting place to grow wine grapes, or anything else for that matter. It is the place where two major weather systems meet, one off the Aral Mountains and the other from the Aegean Sea. As a result they have a steady, sometimes intense wind that blows across the area but virtually no rain. The soils here are also quite fertile, primarily sand and limestone, mixed with weathered rocks for drainage. The Tikves valley also shares the same latitude as the Russian River Valley and the Burgundy region of France.

Macedon, which is owned by the Jordanov family, is the driving force for quality in this region. Forty years ago they brought in a French consultant to help them determine the best varieties to grow in the area. They settled on several cool climate varieties and set out, planting their vineyards. Over the years they have produced wine for local consumption, but with modern improvements to the cellar, directed by current winemaker Dane Jovanos, they are now making wine of export quality.

Reading over the technical data for this wine, it is not hard to see why this wine has international flare. The winemaking reads the same for any modern winery in the West. The grapes are hand harvested, destemmed and sorted before going into stainless steel fermentors. Jovanos lets the skins pre-soak with the juice for eighteen hours, then ferments the wine slowly for twenty days. The wine is then racked to French oak barrels, where it is aged for fourteen months. For freshness, they blend in five percent of Vranec, a local red variety known for its high acidity.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for a half hour before serving. Once you do this wine reveals a deep nose of fresh and cooked black cherries, kissed with the signature profile of Cabernet Franc; thyme, bay leaf, Thai basil and sage. The feel on the palate is firm to start, but the fruit pops out in the middle and carries into the long finish. Serve this wine with any red meat dish, particularly those involving herbs, such as pot roast, chimichurri or Thai beef salad.

Greek Bread Salad

My thrifty Italian Grandmother used to make this dish, called Panzanella, using her homemade egg dough bread and fresh-from-the-garden tomatoes. For years I have tried to replicate it with little success. Then I stumbled on a trick that makes all the difference, which is incorporated in this recipe. Toasting the bread, and assembling just minutes before serving prevents this from becoming a soggy mess.

This recipe puts a Greek spin on this classic recipe. You can serve as a side dish or as the base for grilled chicken or shrimp.

1/4 cup chopped jarred pepperoncini, plus 1 1/2 tablespoons pepperoncini brine
1 1/2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 teaspoon Dijon mustard
6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 pint cherry tomatoes, halved
1 (16-ounce) can chickpeas drained and rinsed
1 cucumber, peeled, halved lengthwise, seeded, and sliced thin
1 cup crumbled feta cheese
3/4 cup pitted kalamata olives, halved
1/2 small red onion, halved and sliced thin
2 (10-inch) pita breads, torn into 1-inch pieces
1 garlic clove, minced
1/3 cup chopped fresh parsley
Salt and pepper

1. Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Combine pepperoncini brine, vinegar, 1/2 teaspoon oregano, and mustard in medium bowl. Slowly whisk 5 tablespoons oil into vinegar mixture. Add tomatoes, chickpeas, cucumber, feta, olives, onion, and pepperoncini and toss to combine. Let sit 30 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, toss pita, remaining oil, garlic, and remaining oregano in medium bowl. Bake pita on rimmed baking sheet until golden brown, about 10 minutes, stirring halfway through baking. Stir toasted pita and parsley into salad. Let stand 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Serve.

Steak Chimichurri

There are few recipes that accentuate the slightly herbal quality of Cabernet Franc like Chimichurri sauce. When I traveled in Argentina, considered the home of this condiment, I learned that each region has its own interpretation. Some versions, such as those in Mendoza, tend to have more peppers and less herbs. Regions closer to Buenos Aires typically produce a version closer to his. The key is the slightly tart element brought on by a kiss of vinegar.

2 cloves garlic, unpeeled
1/2 cup chopped fresh parsley
2 chopped scallions
1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
5 tablespoons olive oil
Salt and pepper
1 flank steak (about 1 1/2 pounds)

1. Toast garlic in large skillet over medium-low heat, shaking pan occasionally, until fragrant and spotty brown, about 5 minutes. When cool enough to handle, peel garlic and transfer to blender with parsley, scallions, vinegar, and pepper flakes. With blender running, slowly drizzle in 4 tablespoons oil until smooth and emulsified. Season with salt and pepper.

2. Pat steak dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat remaining oil in empty skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook steak until well browned, 5 to 7 minutes per side. Transfer to cutting board, tent with foil, and let rest 5 minutes. Slice steak thinly against grain. Serve, passing sauce at table.