



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

2015 Driopi Nemea Reserva - \$49

This is the first time we've selected a Greek wine for this club, although not for lack of effort. For several years I have desired to feature an example of the Agiorgitiko grape, but finding enough quantity has proven elusive. Luckily, when I tasted this wine in February, I was able to secure the last 30 six-packs of this vintage for our club.

My interest in Greek wines started over a decade ago when my friend Andreas Afxendiou approached me about tasting some wines he was starting to distribute. Many Winter Park/Maitland residents know Andreas better as "the chicken guy" and long-time proprietor of Athena Chicken. I agreed to taste his selections, so he met me at the store with a dozen bottles, as well as a tray of chicken, potatoes, stuffed grape leaves and his delicious zucchini. We pulled corks, talked and tasted, but left the meeting unsure of the potential of the wines. The whites were fine, but the reds were pretty darn rustic. Now, at least 15 years later, the wines are far better for reasons I will explain.

A few weeks ago, in preparation for this write-up, I listened to the podcast **I'll Drink to That**, which I strongly recommend. The episode I listened to was an interview with George Skouras, a Greek winemaker who studied in Burgundy before returning home. He explains that despite more than 3,000 years of winemaking history, the Greek wine industry was very primitive even into the 1990s, so much so that many winemakers in the the Peloponnese region really had little idea how to produce wines from the the aforementioned Agiorgitiko grape. Each winery had their own ideas but based most decisions on tradition. As a result, most wines were over-extracted, aggressively tannic and, frankly, a tough glass to drink. Skouras, along with several other trained winemakers, began experimenting with fruit grown in different conditions, picking dates, extraction/skin contact length and aging process. Now, 20 years later, their understanding of this variety is far better, and the wines resemble nothing of the rustic beasts we drank while eating Andreas' chicken.

My selection comes from another of the vanguard producers of Greece, Yiannis Tselepos, who also trained in oenology at the University of Dijon in Burgundy. When he returned to Greece, he bought his first vineyards in Arcadia and focused on the local variety, Moscofilero. To this day he is considered the king of this variety, which with rose-colored skin can produce white and rosé wines. A decade ago, he turned his attention to the Peloponnese region of Nemea, launching the Kitmma Driopi winery focusing on the Agiorgitiko variety.

The Agiorgitiko variety, also known as St. George, is often called the Blood of Hercules after the myth that he slayed the Nemean lion. It is a grape that is thought to be indigenous to Greece, although there is no ancient record of its cultivation. Like Merlot, it can produce very different wines depending on climate and soil type, but it is consistently low in acid and offers something of a spicy aromatic quality. In the modern era, most examples were highly tannic, but producers have changed extraction methods so most versions I taste now are powerful but more polished.

The grapes for this wine come from a 50-year-old vineyard near Koutsi, Nemea, at an elevation of more than 1,000 feet above sea level. Tselepos replanted a portion of the vineyard with more clonal variety, with an emphasis on low yields. This vineyard only produces two tons of fruit per acre, which is about 1/4 of the standard for Napa Cab and 1/2 for the classified growths of Bordeaux. The wine was fermented in tank then aged in 100% new French oak for 12 months.

You will want to decant this wine for half an hour before serving. It shows classic notes of Agiorgitiko: graphite, cooked blackberries, fresh Italian plums, black licorice, balsamic syrup and toasted walnuts. On the palate it shows a good bit of oak tannins, but also a big core of fruit, buffered by the structure at the finish. Drink this wine 2025-2035.

2015 Julio Bastos Dona Maria Alentejo Grande Reserva - \$55

In addition to Greece, another area I have wanted to promote more is Portugal, where I am finding impressive quality and value at all levels. This is not the first feature for this club from Portugal; in 2015, I selected a Douro Reserva. At the time, most of the dry table wines available from the country were from the houses of the Douro, where Port wine is produced. Today the availability of wines from all of the different wine regions is more extensive, and I have found feature-worthy

examples from many of them. This selection comes from the Alentejo region, a sprawling area located east of the capital of Lisbon. While wine production in this area dates to Roman times, it has only been since the 1990s that there has been emphasis on wine production in Alentejo. However, the region is very important to wines everywhere as the largest area of cork production in the world.

Unlike the dramatic, terraced vineyards of the Douro Valley in the north of Portugal, most of Alentejo is a series of rolling hills. The soils of the region are diverse, with pockets of granite, schist, limestone, quartz, sand and clay in many areas. Our feature comes from the sub-zone of Borba, near the town of Estremoz. The current proprietor, Julio Bastos, has revitalized this 130-year-old estate, quickly vaulting the winery to near the top of all Portuguese estates. In fact, the real name of this property is Quinta do Carmo, but in 1992, Bastos sold 50% to Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Lafite), who moved the wine production to a new, nearby winery. Bastos also later sold his remaining shares and returned to his winery, but is unable to market his wines under that label. In the process, he restored the winery, including ancient marble lagars (fermentors).

The base of this wine is from an 80-year-old vineyard of Alicante Bouchet, with 20% Touriga Nacional, 2% Petit Verdot and 10% Syrah. Although not indigenous to the region, Alicante Bouchet is one of the most popular varieties, and Bastos farms a very old clone of the variety that is unique to most others. Alicante Bouchet, also called Garnacha Tintorera, is a teinturier variety, meaning the flesh of the grape has color, not just the skins. This variety can produce wines that are not only incredibly deeply colored but aggressively tannic as well. Bastos uses the old marble lagars to foot-trod the grapes, a counter-intuitive process that makes the wines less tannic by extracting them more before fermentation. This wine is then aged for a year in concrete, another year in French oak barrels, mostly new, then an additional three years in bottle before release.

Decant this wine at least half an hour before serving, an hour would be best. The nose is a lush and boisterous combination of lingonberry preserves, blueberry pie, graphite, milk chocolate, clove and cinnamon. On the palate, this wine shows a good bit of oak at first, then layers begin to unfold into a long, serious finish. Drink this wine with steaks and roasts from 2025 to 2040.

Domaine Lejeune Pommard 1er Cru Les Poutures 2019 - \$79

This final selection has nothing to do with discovering new regions or countries. Frankly, this is one of the best wines I have tasted this year, and the opportunity to buy it for the club was too great. It is a Burgundy from one of the masters of Pommard, Aubert Lefas, who I was lucky enough to visit and have dinner with in April 2019.

The Lejeune estate can trace its history back to shortly after the French revolution when the buildings of the local abbey, Brotherhood of the Saint Sacrement, were sold off. By 1864, the estate was nearly 50 acres when Maxime Lejeune, for whom it is named, died with only three daughters. For five generations the property was divided and parcels were sold, until 1977 when it was inherited by François Jullien de Pomerol. De Pomerol was a professor of oenology at Beaune's Lycée Viticole, so he set to work restoring the estate, which was then only 16.5 acres. His son-in-law, Aubert, joined him in 1994 and has been completely at the helm for many years. Prior to de Pomerol, most of the wine produced at Lejeune was sold to negociants, but by 1990 they started bottling all of the production under their label.

In addition to great holdings, de Pomerol brought a very interesting approach for red wine production in the cellar, a practice that Lefas follows to this day. Of course all the grapes are hand-harvested and sorted to remove any imperfect grapes. He then fills his wood fermentors 20-40% full of whole clusters of grapes, then foot-trods them to break the skins. He then fills the tanks almost completely full with whole clusters and allows the fermentation to begin. What happens is the slow fermentation at the bottom of the fermentor creates a "semi-carbonic" environment that allows for a gentle extraction of color and tannin without the risk of oxidation. Over time, Lefas has adjusted the amount of whole clusters, sometimes adding only uncrushed grapes when he feels the wines need less structure. As a result, the fermentations take up to 25 days, and yet the wines do not taste or feel over-extracted. The wines are then racked to barriques, in this case 25% new, and aged for 18 months. The wines are then racked to tank to allow them to settle for two months, then bottled without filtration or fining.

When you open this wine, decant it for half an hour before serving. The nose is a luscious combination of dried red cherries, raspberry fruit leather, black licorice, dried parsley, bay leaf and vanilla wafers. On the palate it is very serious, with superb concentration and a knock-out finish that carries for a good minute. This wine shows the superb quality of the 2019 vintage and suggests the wines will drink well young and age nicely. Drink 2022-2035.