

The "new" Retsina Cult wine with a cultural background

From Karl Bajano

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Retsina is a style of wine that is thousands of years old, and even in modern Greece still represents the classical ubiquitous style of wine. No taverna in Greece could afford not to stock retsina, and it can be found on the wine lists of even the most sophisticated upper-class restaurants. It is this matter-of-factness that has on the one hand given it the highest degree of recognition of all Greek wines, but has on the other hand also almost caused its downfall. Retsina was originally the name for a specific white wine from the Attica region, called Savatianó, to which pine resin was added. However, around 40 years ago the name developed into being something of a brand.

In fact, the distancing of the modern retsina „brand“ from the original meaning took place in the 1960's, at a time when the major wineries flooded both the Greek and the Western European markets with cheap resinated wine. This was made possible by the lowered expectation of quality, as well as by changes in the shopping habits of the Greeks themselves, as well as by the tourist boom, mainly with visitors from Western Europe. It was in the nature of things that most of the tourists would arrive in summer, at a time when the wine – still mostly stored in barrels at the time – was already amber-coloured, old and oxidative. Surprisingly enough, the wine was accepted in this state, and was drunk, and the faults of the wines came to be thought of as the special characteristics of retsina. Then, in the 1990's, the eating habits of young Greeks changed significantly, and the tourists increasingly demanded standardised food dishes. This led to some international grape varieties, such as Sauvignon Blanc, being in greater demand than the typical domestic wines. This change in demand and acceptance was practically provoked by the agony of traditional quality wine production in the preceding years. It was only in the late 1980's that some wine producers, frequently brought about by a change in generations at the helm of some estates, returned to the old insight that tradition does not mean looking after the ashes, but handing on the flame. Today, the wine scene in Greece is very active indeed. Many of the wines of the producers who are now so active, be it in the traditional or in the international style, can already compete quite successfully on the international stage. Or, as is the case with the „new“ retsina and the rediscovered treasure of indigenous varieties, they make up an own category, with individualistic expression and very special aesthetics.



Savianó – the original grape used for retsina

However, for the majority of Greeks retsina is still a liquid part of everyday life. As far as foreign tourists visiting Greece are concerned, it is part of the holiday spirit, and almost an obligation that one is expected to fulfil, namely to down a glass or two of resinated wine. There cannot be many wine-drinkers in the German-speaking countries of Europe who do not know the name retsina, and who have not tasted it at least once. But to go back home to wherever you live in Western Europe, and to then go out and buy a bottle of retsina? Perhaps on the odd occasion in a Greek restaurant, but even there one then tends to order a beer. Add to this the general lack of knowledge about Greek wine both among consumers and among restaurant owners, and the prospects look bleak. Retsina, that appears to be the generally predominating taste impression and image, is an unusual to scurrilous, bitter, resinated wine with a taste somewhere between vinegar with pine-scented shampoo and flat apple juice with a turpentine flavour. It thus seems understandable that most wine lovers and connoisseurs will find this style of wine uninteresting at best, and will tend to write it off as being unacceptable.

The resulting significant decline in export volumes over the past decade is a clear sign of the developing taste consciousness of the target countries, a trend that appears to have sealed the fate of retsina. The ignorance and lack of interest is the same in the wine trade all over the world, resulting in dumping prices and a distinct lack of marketing efforts have led to this discouraging situation, in spite of the existence of a number of quality-conscious producers. In a sense, it is 5 minutes to midnight, and it is appropriate that finally those producers who see retsina primarily as a valuable cultural product, are standing up for their passion more vociferously than ever before. At this stage, the response is still meagre. However, it can be expected that the efforts and enthusiasm projected should soon show positive results, there is no doubt the

„new“ retsina has what it takes to become a cult wine with a cultural background. Those who are familiar with the Greek mentality claim it is almost impossible for Greeks to work as a team, rather preferring to make their individual efforts, but even in this area there are signs of change. There appears to be a core group of producers of high-quality retsina developing, producers who are less concerned about the region the wine comes from, and more concerned about the authenticity of the wines and the resin, and of the culture.

If you look at the key points of this group philosophy, several questions raise their heads. One is the question as to where this type of wine actually comes from, the other is which grape varieties were originally used, why is the level of spiciness so different in different wines, and, last but not least, at what occasions should the wine be drunk.

Originally, retsina came from the Attica region, which is also the oldest viticultural region in Greece. In this region, production was concentrated on the gravel, limestone and clay soils around the towns of Markopoulo, Spata and Koropi. Today, these names no longer evoke idyllic and romantic emotions about wine, as this is where the Athens international airport is now located. As is so often the case, one should not be too sweeping in one's judgements – while some 2000 hectares of prime vineyard land had to make way for the airport, the remaining 8000 hectares of vineyards are producing some surprisingly good quality wines.

Back to history. Even in the first few decades of the 20th century, Attica supplied the whole of Greece with retsina. It was in any case the house wine of Athenians, and the arrival of the first deliveries of a new vintage was always accompanied by a huge festival. One cannot help but be reminded of Lyon with its Beaujolais and Vienna with its young Heurigen wines. The merchants visited the wine producers to select the barrels of wine they wished to purchase, and the wine was then transported in barrel, and distributed all over Greece. Each wine producer had his own typical and distinctive retsina style, be

it good or bad. Even at that time it was clear that merchants who wanted big volumes were usually not getting the best quality wines. In the course of time it became inevitable that producers in other wine-growing regions also wanted to have a piece of this cake, the more so since it seemed to be so easy to simply add some resin to white wine, this was almost like a licence to print money. However, in this case the increasing diversity did not lead to an improvement in quality. Rather, retsina was reduced to being a resinated white wine without a cultural background.

The fact is that not every white wine is suitable for the production of retsina. Naturally this is really not important if you are reducing the product to that of a flavoured wine, a resinated beverage, so to speak. However, for a wine with character, the base wine is of great importance, and even more so when you are talking of a controlled designation of origin. The primary grape for authentic retsina is Savatianó (Greek: Σαββατιανό), to which may be added Roditis and Assyrtiko. The Savatianó is actually an amazing mass producer, which in days gone by, when the climate was still a little different, was sometimes allowed to produce two crops in a year. However, it also reacts in the same way as do many varieties of this type. If it is subjected to careful attention in the vineyard, with pruning aimed at producing a normal yield – which in this case is a severely reduced yield – it produces a refreshing wine with elegant fruit and a delicate mineral note. Where one is really concerned about achieving optimum quality, the preference is often for grapes from very old vines, as these have deep roots and naturally low, reduced yields, providing wines with even more character. These vineyards are all tended exclusively with manual labour, they are kept healthy without the use of hard chemical sprays, and no herbicides are used. All producers of good retsina are unanimous in the opinion that you can only produce high-quality retsina, or large volumes – never both.



Retsina producers – individual fighters with a group dynamic

The opinions are divided when it comes to the main grape variety to be used, as both Roditis and Assyrtiko have a little more breeding and character than does Savatianó. However, the hard core of retsina purists will certainly not discuss any grape varieties other than these three indigenous ones. In addition, the use of natural wild yeasts is not a topic for discussion in this loose group – some do it one way, some another. A more or less standard feature is that the wines are basically ready for release by early October, are generally released on the market well before Christmas, and should be drunk within a year of the harvest. There is one exception to this rule, as the Georgas Family estate has chosen a different path, producing wines with a longer maturation potential.

The producers of culturally correct retsina do agree on the relative standing of their wine. This is what it should be: clean, refreshing style, a wine that cleanses the palate, fairly light in alcohol (around 12%), light yellow in colour, fruity with light bitter and spicy notes, with the truly elegant aromas of a pine forest in Greece, with menthol and almost peppery notes. The typical retsina is no blockbuster, and nothing to get wildly excited about, rather it is an agreeable individualist, simply a good wine for many occasions, a wine that can be drunk casually, and provides a great deal of pleasure. This is how the producers describe their ideal retsina.

It will certainly still take some time before the average Central European wine-lover condescends to once again more closely investigate this style of wine, but when it happens, he will come to notice and appreciate the subtle differences. The Greek department of agriculture has already shown its support for the development, in that only retsina made from Savatianó and sourced from the regions of Attica, Viotia (Boethia, north of Attica) and Evia (the island of Euboea) is allowed to bear a seal of quality. The state control number provides a guarantee that both the origin and the production have been controlled by the ministry of agriculture. There is no doubt that this is an important first step in the right direction, in an effort to halt the untamed spread of low-quality products. One can hope and expect that additional measures, aimed at not only guaranteeing the origin, but also the quality of a wine, will follow in time.

The second quality factor is the resin itself, with the geographical origin, the tree, the method of extraction used as well as the consistency of the resin all playing a part. The tree in question is the Aleppo pine (*pinus halepensis*), frequently incorrectly referred to as a fir. It originated in the Eastern Mediterranean region, but has since spread to the entire Mediterranean region. Although it is all officially one genus, the trees of Attica and of some of the Greek islands are considered to be the only ones that produce the tasty, elegantly spicy resin best suited for addition to wine. In order to tap the resin, the bark of the trees is carefully removed in a very special way. The stripped sections may not be larger than approx. 20X30 cm, and any section may only be stripped at very long intervals. A healthy tree will produce around 20 kg of resin each year, of which only around half can be used for mixing with wine. The best, top-quality resin is white and has a very thick consistency. It exudes an enchanting spicy aroma with notes of menthol, incense, a delicate hint of petrol and blossoms, and the taste is similar. In addition to this one can also mention a noticeable but piquant bitter note, and surprisingly fruity notes. Such high-quality resin can only be collected manually.



Pine „tears“ – the bewitching aroma of menthol, incense, petrol and blossoms

It is thus easy to understand that, if you wish to produce large volumes of retsina in quantities of millions of litres of wine, other methods will have to be implemented. Frequently, resin is also collected from the sub-species *pinus brutia*, which produces twice as much resin in a year as does *pinus halepensis*. This resin has a much higher terpene content, it smells and tastes much coarser, it is more angular and obtrusive, and is, in fact, also used for the production of varnishes and colophonium. This resin is usually machine-harvested (in the past, chemical methods involving sulphuric acid were used), the procedure is cheap and takes no note of regional characteristics – simply a more or less industrial process.



Old Savatianó vines in the Spata region

Other factors affecting the quality are the time at which the resin is added, the quantity added, and the duration for which it is added. In most cases, the resin is packed into permeable bags, which are suspended in the barrels. As soon as the desired degree of flavouring is achieved, the resin can easily be removed again. An alternative is to simply add the resin to the wine as is, it will sink to the bottom, and can be removed from the barrel when the wine is racked, together with the deposit. However, this method has the disadvantage that the winemaker has no control over the amount of aromatic substances released, also it becomes very difficult to clean the barrels, and this is then often not done properly. Smaller producers, who know from the outset which types of grapes they are using, and which quantity is to be produced, will frequently add the resin towards the end of the fermentation process, and will leave it in the wine for up to three weeks. Others will wait for fermentation to be completed, and will begin the resinating process a week or two later. For large-scale production and market-orientated decisions, particularly with a view to selecting the wines to be used for the production of retsina, producers will first mix the resin, preferably with some alcohol, or with some wine, and will add it in a solution form. The quantities of resin added can vary tremendously, depending entirely on the producer's preference, from as much as 20 kg of resin per 1000 litres of wine, down to as little as 500 g per 10 hl. Naturally, a generous addition of large quantities of resin will cover any characteristics of the wine, be they positive or negative, and in most cases is used as a means of covering up any faults in low-quality base wines.

Having discussed the production, and factors influencing quality, one is left with the question as to the types of food that will go well with retsina. After all, most Western Europeans will only rarely be eating dishes of traditional Greek cuisine. As a flavoured wine, which is after all what it is, it should be used where one might otherwise consider enjoying a dry Gewürztraminer, Muscat, or perhaps dry sherries as well as dry versions of some of the modern grape crossings. For instance, to accompany spicy Indian as well as other, mainly hot and spicy, Asian dishes, as the resin cools the palate, and virtually polished the taste-buds. It also goes very well with spicy grilled meat, or sardines and mackerels, or with fried, herb-filled fish, and naturally also with salads prepared with cheese and olives. In fact, even some spicy pizzas would be happy to be

accompanied by such a partner. After all, most people enjoy the combination of Mediterranean dishes and wines: Italian wines with tapas, spicy whites from Italy and France with various salads, and Spanish wine with pizza are hardly unusual anymore.

The only problem is that the new, individualistic retsina is currently still only available from a handful of outlets. We can but hope that the initiative shown by quality-conscious producers and importers will soon change this situation. The wine is definitely worth the effort of seeking it out!

Suppliers:

Gaia (Ritinitis Nobilis)

www.symposio.com/weinhandlung
www.griechischer-weinversand.de
www.kantos.ch

Kechris (Kechribari, Pine's tear)

www.hellas-shop.de
www.nikolaou-shop.de
www.bolossis-gmbh.de

Papagiannakos (Retsina of Mesogaia)

www.wein-cantina.com

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Georgas

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Vassiliou

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