



The Wine Roads of Northern Greece take in spectacular alpine roads, ancient monuments, top restaurants and unique wineries.

The Wine Roads of Northern Greece

Few places in the world combine wine and culture as well as the wine roads of northern Greece. Pick any road, and discover not just unique wines and indigenous grapes, but spectacular nature, historic villages, and the wonders of the ancient world.

The immense bronze Derveni krater in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki is proof of the sacred place that wine has held in Greek culture. The 40-kilo funerary urn was modelled on a 'krater', the wine vessel used at ancient symposia, or drinking parties, where young men came together to debate over wine diluted with water. The wine was clearly excellent, if someone loved it so much they insisted on being buried in a wine jar.

And yet the world is only now waking up to Greek wine, largely because of the 1950s and '60s migrations, when waves of Greek migration took place. Unfortunately, the wines of the time that Greeks took with them could be poor quality, creating an image that persists today. After Greece joined the European Union in 1981 and the economy improved, however, there was more money for wine and quality rose. Today, Greece is dotted with state-of-the-art wineries that produce innovative riffs on classics like Syrah and Pinot Noir, along with crisp blends of Assyrtiko and Sauvignon Blanc, or wines made from indigenous grapes.

The best way to discover them is to explo-

re the wine roads of northern Greece, which pass by the doors of some of Greece's best wineries.

THE WINE ROADS

In 1993, 13 wineries came together to create the Wine Roads of Macedonia. In 2002, the Association expanded and became The Wine Roads of Northern Greece. Today, it has 29 members.

"It has developed into a much bigger organisation than we expected," said Stelios Kechris, during a tasting at Stelios Kechris Domaine, outside Thessaloniki. He explained that the Wine Roads consist of eight routes, taking in monasteries, restaurants, museums and significant sites. While the wine routes are named after their respective areas – Stelios Kechris Domaine is on the Wine Route of Thessaloniki – northern Greece is divided into four geographical regions: Epirus, Macedonia, Thrace and Thessaly, within which there are different appellations. Kechris says it's a testament to the enthusiasm of the wineries that the wine routes have come into being so quickly. "Twenty years ago, there wasn't even

the idea of wine tourism in Greece. Now, there are guided wine tours, restaurants, degustations..."

Kechris is an old name in Greek wine and Stelios Kechris joined the family business in 1984, after studying in Greece and France. As well as producing highly-awarded wines from both international and indigenous varietals, he is known as the 'father of retsina', thanks to his high-quality approach that has brought the unique wine back to glory.

Stelios Kechris Domaine is in Macedonia, northern Greece's largest region, bordering Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria. It has a continental climate with hot summers that are moderated by cool nights, and cold winters. The same region is home to another famous name, Ktima Gerovassiliou, which makes both Greek and international wines. Those seeking something unique should try the Avaton, a blend of Mavroudi, Mavrotragano and Limnio, a wine mentioned by Aristophanes in 5BCE. Ktima Gerovassiliou also has a wine museum – exhibits include more than 2,000 corkscrews. Wine & Spirits magazine named Ktima Gerovassiliou as Winery of the Year four times, while others

have named Vangelis Gerovassiliou among the world's best winemakers.

THE WINE ROUTES OF THE LAKES

Travel around the lakes for bright blue skies, tortoises trying their luck on the roads, and shimmering water. At Voyatzi Estate, a modernist white building at the foothills of the Pieria Mountains, the waters of Lake Polyfytos practically lap at the vineyards. Originally wine merchants, the Voyatzi family settled in the developing town of Katerini and ran a wine cellar until 1922. Third-generation Yannis Voyatzi studied oenology in Bordeaux before returning to the region and establishing a vineyard with his father and brother; the vineyards were planted between 1991 and 1994. They're in the perfect position, being on gentle slopes whose climate is moderated by the nearby water.

The wines are proudly Greek in origin: a straight Xinomavro, and a white blend of Assyrtiko, Chardonnay and Malvasia Aromatica. "The plan is to eventually take out the international varieties," says Eirini Zande, who is conducting the tasting. "It's time for us to go back and work with Greek varieties - you can find good Chardonnay anywhere in the world."

Alpha Estate is located in northwestern Greece, in the heart of the Amyndeon appellation, between lakes Petron and Vegoritis, at an altitude exceeding 600 m, with ideal climate and soil conditions. Vinegrower Makis Mavridis and winemaker Angelos Iatridis aim to produce wines of the highest level from the single block, privately owned 85 ha vineyard. The establishment of the vineyard in the late 1990s represented a new reference for viticulture in Greece, combining ideal conditions and scientific vineyard design and management. Recognised by the international wine press, their wines regularly gain high scores, from their entry level Axia Red, (50% Syrah and 50% Xinomavro) to their Xinomavro Reserve Old Vines, from their 93-year-old ungrafted Xinomavro bush vine.

THE WINE ROADS OF NAOUSSA

The Boutaris family have played an outsized role in the establishment of the modern wine industry, both by trail-blazing high-quality

production, and by encouraging the development of other winemakers: Yiannis Boutaris is often called the 'Robert Mondavi of Greece'.

His son Stelios founded Kir-Yianni Estate in 1997, in Yianakohori, the highest point of Naoussa, on a 50 ha estate the family acquired in the 1960s. From the beginning, the estate planted Xinomavro in double vertical shoot positioning vineyards, a technique unused in Greece at the time. Today, Xinomavro is the



Pavlidis Estate

flagship of the northern wine roads, and Kir-Yianni is one of Greece's largest vineyards, covering 60 ha. Among the winery's many offerings are the popular Akakies rosé and Akakies sparkling, from 100% Xinomavro.

Also in Naoussa is Vaeni Naoussa, showcasing a traditional co-operative with more than 200 members. Of particular interest is their Xinomavro, which literally means 'acid black'. While Greek winemakers call Xinomavro the 'Pinot Noir' of Greece, thanks to its finicky nature when growing, but its expressiveness in the glass, they could also call it the 'Nebbiolo of Greece', given its fine, lingering acidity that gives it such good ageing potential.

THE WINE ROUTE OF DIONYSUS

Drama, one of the country's most promising wine regions, has many places sacred to the god Dionysus. While archaeology suggests that Drama was a vast vineyard in ancient times, it's only relatively recently that viticulturists have recognised the outstanding potential of the region, better known for its marble quarries.

Ktima Pavlidis, owned by Christofors Pavlidis, spreads its white wings spread under Mount Falakro. Inside, the winery is clean-lined and state-of-the-art. The wine labels are also elegant, clear and easy to recall; there is a Thema range, which is all about style – such as a Syrah and Agiorgitiko blend – and an Emphasis range, which is about single varieties, such as Assyrtiko.

Another memorable winery is the Wine Art Estate, situated opposite Mt Pangaion, the centre of the ancient Dionysian cults. Owned by Yiannis Papadopoulos and Yiannis Kalaitzidis, it makes a range of popular wines, of both international and local varieties. But what gives it visual impact is the way the winery is bisected by a road, so when you walk underground from one section to another, you may be walking beneath cars.

INDIGENOUS VARIETIES

Debina

Used for dry, sparkling and semi-sparkling wines. Given the international surge in sparkling, the charming wines, and the catchy name, Debina is sure to be a hit.

Assyrtiko

Assyrtiko from northern Greece show great aromatic intensity and weight on the palate and works well on its own, or blended.

Malagousia

When Domaine Porto Carras rescued Malagousia from obscurity in the 1970s, wine lovers were astounded by its power and aromatic character. Now found across Greece.

Roditis

The most planted white variety in Greece, Roditis is one of the oldest indigenous varieties known. It can be rich or elegant, but always shows balanced acidity.

Xinomavro

Xinomavro is one of the noblest varieties of southern Europe. Capable of producing wines in a range of styles, its high acidity ensures that the best Xinomavro wines can age for decades. The flagship red of northern Greece.

Limnio

Mentioned by Aristotle and Homer, Limnio is an ancient variety. Moderately high in alcohol, Limnio offers an aromatic profile full of fresh herbs and red berries.

THE WINE ROUTE OF EPIRUS

Getting around northern Greece is easy, thanks to the new Egnatia Odos highway, one of the largest and most ambitious civil engineering projects in Europe. One of the most beautiful places served by the road is the alpine village of Metsovo, built some time before the Ottoman empire. Today, this historic village is a magnet for tourists, lured by the beauty of the stone houses that overlook spectacular alpine valleys.

The region is Epirus in north-western Greece, on the Albanian border. Wine production dates back to the 1950s, when Evangelos Averoff – a writer and a remarkable man by all accounts – planted Cabernet Sauvignon, after he discovered there had been wine production in the region in the 18th century. His Bordeaux-style wine went on to become a bestseller. Today, the Katogi Averoff winery also produces a Xinomavro, among other wines, and attracts more than 10,000 visitors a year. The winery has been structured for wine education and includes holograms and a bridge over eerily-lit bottles of wine.

Today Epirus has about 900 ha of vineyards, with vines up to 1,000m. In the centre of the region is Zitza, where the white grape Debina, the sparkling wine grape, is grown.

CHALKIDIKI

The hotel that dominates the luxury resort of Porto Carras looks like an ocean liner, recalling Greece's shipping history. Sitting on the western coast of Sithonia, Halkidiki's central peninsula, it offers beaches, fine dining, marinas, luxury accommodation – and Greece's largest organic vineyard. Originally a monastic property, Gianni Carras developed Porto Carras into a resort in the 1960s. It includes a monastic-style house for hire that's been enjoyed by Salvador Dali, Joan Baez, Rudolf Nureyev and other such luminaries. From here, it's a short drive down a very bumpy, hilly road, to see the spectacular terraced vineyards, which overlook the Toroneos Gulf.

The vineyards were originally planted in 1965, with the choice of both French and Greek grape varieties suggested by Bordeaux oenologist Emile Peynaud; the Domaine Porto Carras winery followed in 1970. Today, a tourist train runs from resort to the winery, making it one of the busiest cellar doors in Greece. But this is no tourist trap – the wines have been consistently praised by top international critics, it is the only place in Greece with an appellation in international



Stelios Kechris Domaine

varieties, and the winery is credited with re-discovering Malagouzia. Of particular interest is the 100% PDO Limnia.

MUCH TO DISCOVER

The gateway to the northern wine roads of Greece is Thessaloniki, a flourishing Mediterranean city worth a visit, both for its own sake, and as a way of exploring Greek history. A walk along the promenade, for example, brings the visitor past the statue of Alexander the Great, the Greek general who had conquered the world by 30. At the time of writing, archaeologists have discovered a major tomb from his era that may or may not contain the bones of the great general. Which is all part of the charm of Greece – there's always more to discover. And it's always good.

THE WINERIES OF THE WINE ROADS OF NORTHERN GREECE

The Wine Route of Epirus

- Domaine Glinavos, www.glinavos.gr
- Winery Zinos, www.zitsawine.gr
- Katogi & Strofilia, www.katogi-strofilia.gr

The Wine Route of Lakes

- Domaine Stergiou, www.ktimastergiou.gr
- The Two Friends, www.diofili.gr
- Voyatzi Estate, www.ktimavoyatzi.gr
- Alpha Estate, www.alpha-estate.com

The Wine Route of the Olympic Gods

- Domaine Katsaros, www.ktimakatsarou.gr
- Tsantali Rapsani Winery, www.tsantali.com
- Ktima Kitrvs, www.ktimakitrus.gr

The Wine Route of Naoussa

- Boutari, www.boutari.gr

- Vaeni Naoussa, www.vaeni-naoussa.gr
- Domaine Foundi, www.ktimafoundi.gr
- Kir-Yianni, www.kiryianni.gr
- Elinos, www.elinos.gr

The Wine Route of Pella and Goumenissa

- Boutari, www.boutari.gr
- Chatzivaritis Estate, www.chatzivaritis.gr
- Tatsis Estate, www.ktimatatsis.gr

The Wine Route of Thessaloniki

- Domaine Gerovassiliou, www.gerovassiliou.gr
- Stelios Kechris Domaine, www.kechri.gr
- Babatzim, www.babatzim.gr

The Wine Route of Chalkidiki

- Domaine Porto Carras, www.portocarras.com

- Claudia Papayianni Estate, www.cp-domaine.gr
- Tsantali Agios Pavlos Winery, www.tsantali.com
- Mylopotamos, www.mywines.gr
- Metoxi Chromitsa Winery, www.tsantali.com

The Wine Route of Dionysus

- Estate Wine Art, www.wineart.gr
- Pavlidis Estate, www.ktima-pavlidis.gr
- Estate Biblia Chora, www.bibliachora.gr
- Chatzigeorgious Estate, www.estatechatzigeorgious.com
- Maronia, www.tsantali.com
- Domaine Vourvoukeli, www.ktima-vourvoukeli.gr

To find out more, visit:
www.winesofnorthgreece.gr
www.wineroads.gr