

Tracy Ellen Kamens: Education Update

How Sweet It Is: Muscat love by the glass or shaken up

Among the oldest grape varieties in the world, Muscat shines in a plethora of places from the cool climate of Piedmont, where it sparkles as Asti, to the warmth of Southern France where it dazzles as Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise. And, equally notable, it thrives off the coast of mainland Greece in the Aegean Sea.

Here, the Mediterranean island of Samos nurtures the Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains grape with its steep, terraced vineyards ("pezoules"), deep soils, high altitude and abundant sunshine (3,300 hours per year). Home to the philosopher Pythagoras (of triangular fame), Samos has produced Muscat wine for centuries and is closely linked with its use for the liturgies surrounding the sacrament of Holy Eucharist service of the Roman Catholic Church.

In more modern history, the Union of Vinicultural Cooperatives of Samos (EOSS) was established in 1934 and was among the first cooperatives in Greece. With the participation of 26 wine growing villages, EOSS represents all of the island's growers. In this regard, it is responsible for wine production (it maintains two full-scale wineries for its members), along with sales and marketing activities on behalf of brand Samos.

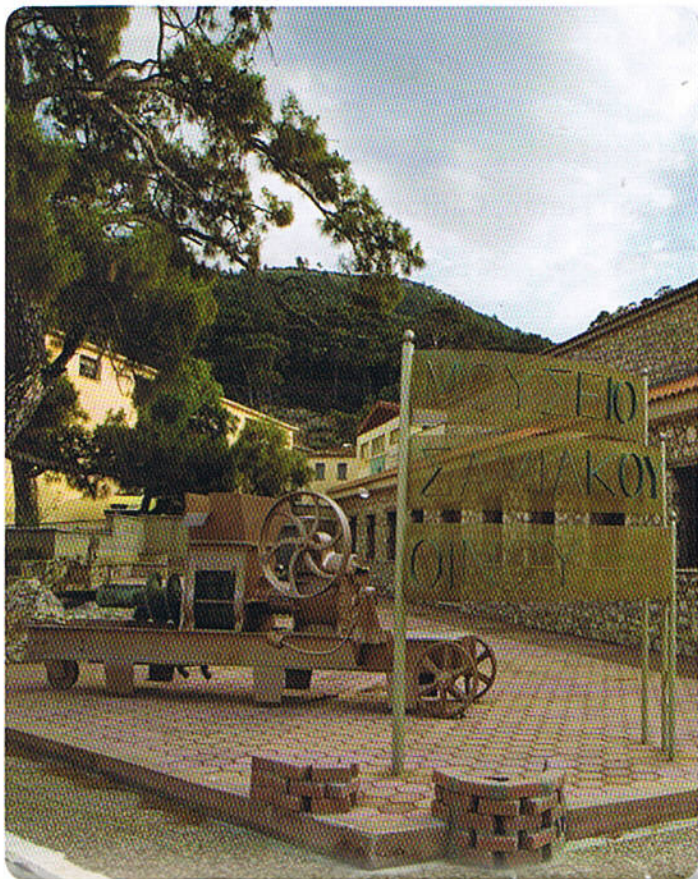
Given that 97% of the island's 4,000 acres of vineyards are planted to Muscat, Samos wines are nearly synonymous with this indigenous variety. The remaining acreage finds a bit of Ritino and Fokiano, which are grown for the production of rosé wines, and



some table grapes. Within the delineated region, most vines can be found on the northern side of the island, along the slopes of Mount Ambelos. Some vineyards are planted at altitudes of up to 900m above sea level, which provides conditions for slow ripening and good sugar development. Low yields are further responsible for the quality of grapes.

The majority of these wines are sweet and, as per Greek wine laws, Samos wines are one of eight dessert wines classified under the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) designation. Thought to be of lesser quality, the island's dry wines are classified as Regional Wines (Vin de Pays).

The dessert wines are produced in three different styles: Samos Doux, Samos Vin Doux



Naturel and Samos Nectar. Samos Doux is a vin de liqueur (aka mistela), produced by the addition of a neutral spirit almost immediately after pressing. With fermentation stopped so quickly, these wines have high levels of residual sugar (200 g/l). The Samos Vin Doux Naturel are akin to the fortified wines of Languedoc-Rousillon, whereby the neutral spirit is added after fermentation has begun. Samos Nectar wines are not fortified at all; rather, the sweetness stems from drying the grapes in the sun to concentrate the sugars before fermenting them into a 14% abv wine, which is then aged in cask for three years. These latter two wines range from 130-150 g/l.

Depending upon where the grapes are grown, a Samos wine may be labeled as Grand Cru. With grapes harvested from the best, mountainous vineyards, these wines are produced as vins doux naturel. An additional labeling term, Anthemis, represents vins de liqueur wines that have been aged in oak for five years.

Despite the high levels of residual sugar in these wines, they do have balanced acidity to keep them from becoming cloying on the palate. That being said, these are decidedly dessert wines and pair best with rich, flavorful cheeses (such as sharp cheddars and intense blue cheeses), or fruit- or custard-style desserts (i.e. strawberry cheesecake, sabayon). A third option is to pair them in a cocktail as their aromatic profile and sweet taste can balance bitter elements and add weight to the palate. Dushan Zaric, co-owner and bartender of the New York City-based Macao Trading Company, has crafted a number of Samos-based cocktails, which work well, including the Nectar Fix (recipe below).

Nectar Fix

Glass: Martini/Cocktail

Ingredients: 1 ¼ ounces Samos Nectar
1 ounce Rye (Dushan specifies Wild Turkey 101)
½ ounce Campari
1 fresh strawberry, quartered
1 fresh strawberry, halved, for garnish

Directions: Pour all ingredients including the quartered strawberry into a mixing glass. Add large, cold ice. Stir for 40 revolutions. Strain into a glass and garnish with half a strawberry.

