vinetur

Santorini's 2023 Harvest: challenges and prospects in the age of climate change

Ancient cultivation meets modern challenges

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Santorini's viticulture faces yet another challenging year as the harvest season comes to a close. Situated as one of the main denominations of HEVA - Heroes of Europe Volcanic Agriculture, the vineyards have had to grapple with the repercussions of changing weather patterns and the broader implications of global climate change.

The iconic island, known for its unique volcanic soils and breathtaking sunsets, experienced a series of climatic adversities in 2023. Extreme natural factors like a winter drought, harsh spring winds, a damaging hailstorm in April, and a prolonged summer heatwave led to a significantly reduced yield, pegged at just 30% of the island's average annual production.

However, even in the face of these challenges, there seems to be a silver lining. Nikos Varvarigos, a seasoned oenologist from Santo Wines, remains optimistic, suggesting that the grapes harvested will result in wines of exceptional quality. He believes the foundations laid are promising.

International Appeal Amid Scarcity

Santorini wines have earned an esteemed position in the global market, with their exclusivity only seeming to enhance their appeal. According to Markos Kafouros, President of Santo Wines, this year's harvest results indicate that Santorini wines will become increasingly rare. Yet, their scarcity has not diminished their allure. A series of promotional activities conducted across various countries have only amplified global consumer interest.

With an estimated production ranging between 2 to 2.5 million liters - of which 35-40% is earmarked for export to major countries such as Germany, the USA, Canada, and the UK - the Denomination of Origin (DOP) Santorini has witnessed an escalating interest accompanied by an impressive 13% sales increase in 2022 compared to the previous year.

Diverse Grapes, Ancient Methods

Stretching across 1,200 hectares of the island, Santorini's vineyards primarily champion the Assyrtiko grape, which occupies about 75% of the vine-covered land. This grape variety is known for its resilience to drought and diseases like peronospora and botrytis. Such adaptability enables the production of diverse wine styles, ranging from robust dry white wines, matured in steel or oak barrels, to raisin wines and sparkling varieties.

Remarkably, in Santorini's vineyards, this grape variety remains in its original form with its roots intact, without any grafting.

Other cultivated varieties include white grapes like Aidani and Athiri, and red grape varieties such as Mavrotragano and Mandilaria.

The DOP Santorini, established in 1971, encompasses both dry white wines aged in oak barrels and naturally sweet wines. Since 2002, it also includes Vinsanto, a naturally sweet wine.

From an agronomic perspective, Santorini preserves ancient cultivation systems. The most notable of these is the 'kouloura' or the 'basket cultivation system'. This technique offers numerous advantages, including water conservation and reduced need for pesticide treatments.

Unified Commitment to Tradition and Sustainability

SantoWines, the Union of Santorini Cooperatives, founded in 1947, stands as the island's largest organization representing all cultivators, boasting 1,200 active members. Their dedication to preserving local traditional agriculture, while producing high-quality DOP Santorini wines and other agricultural products, underlines their commitment to sustainable agricultural development.

Additionally, SantoWines plays a pivotal role alongside the Consortium for the Protection of Soave and Lessini Durello Wines and the Veneto Consortium of Monte Veronese cheese in the European project HEVA – Heroes of Europe Volcanic Agriculture. This initiative, funded by the European Union, emphasizes the promotion of volcanic products.