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The Tinos renaissance

INSIDE INFORMATION GREECE TINOS

Vineyards among the boulders on this windswept Cycladic island are starting to get into their stride and seem likely to encourage more new investment. See [Tinos – the tasting notes](#) for more on specific producers and their wines.

What a contrast. Arriving by ferry from Santorini to Tinos, we left behind an island that was dramatically landscaped, volcanic, stunningly beautiful in parts and ravaged by tourism in others, with the battle between vineyards and tourist development raging.

Tinos, on the other hand, 170 km (105 m) further north in the Aegean, is hilly but decidedly rural and peaceful, or so it seemed in early May when the wild flowers were at their most extravagant.

Tinos is the third largest of the Cyclades islands, between Andros, the largest, and Mykonos, one of the most tourist- and bling-laden. 194 sq km are shared by about 10,000 people, 45+ well-kept villages, their blue-shuttered white houses clustered against the pastoral green in late spring, 1,065 churches – many family-owned and maintained, and used just once a year.

The 700 or so two-storey, ornate, geometrically decorated dovecotes like the one shown below look a bit like small fortifications. Their ubiquity is explained by the Venetians' love of pigeons, both for their meat and for the fertilising power of their droppings. The island is certainly more fertile than Santorini.

Tinos is about two hours by fast ferry from the port of Rafina on the east coast of the mainland, due east of Athens, and the island is becoming increasingly popular with well-heeled Athenians for their second homes.

Most of the of the Greek tourists who come here, often just for the day, are making a pilgrimage to the 19th-century [Holy Church of Panagia of Tinos](#), also

known as Our Lady of Tinos, built on the site where a miraculous icon and the remains of a church were excavated in the early 1820s thanks to oneiric appearances and clues from the Virgin Mary.

If that's not your thing, you would do well to avoid the island on 15 August, one of Greece's most important religious festivals, celebrated here. Visitors crawl on their hands and knees from the harbour to the church, apparently, or drag candles taller than themselves up the hill.

Villages away from the harbour and the church have kept their local identity because there are very strict building regulations, which certainly doesn't seem to be the case on Santorini, where gaining electoral support might possibly influence planning decisions.

The landscape is also littered with abandoned terraces, once planted with cereal crops, vines and figs.

Wine production has thrived and diminished during various periods in the history of the island. At one time they exported their wine to the Vatican. When the Venetians were in charge in the 1600s, they made the locals uproot their vines in favour of grain because they wanted to make sure they had supplies of food in the face of threats from the Ottomans, who eventually captured the island in 1715.

In the early 20th century, Tinians produced as many as 30,000 barrels of wine but production was largely abandoned in the 1970s in favour of livestock. In recent years grapes have generally been used to make the distillate raki for domestic consumption, not always legally, the local favourite flavoured with fennel shoots.

This means that there are very few old vineyards on Tinos – another major difference from Santorini – and most of the recently established producers are having to plant their vineyards from scratch. The centre of the island is littered with huge granite boulders, the vestiges of a battle between the Titans and the gods, a meteorite shower, or left behind by the sea? Clearing these huge boulders and planting the vines can cost €10,000 per hectare, with land costing anywhere between €5,000 and €30,000 per hectare.

There are currently six producers on the island, with a seventh just starting to plant, farming around 50 ha (125 acres) of vines, all established in the last 10–20 years. The four that I visited and their wines are described in [Tinos – the tasting notes](#). The two that I did not visit were Fonsou, which started in 1997 but at the time produced only bulk wine and now produces bottled wine as well as very interesting distillates, and Jérôme Charles Binda's Domaine de Kalathas, the

solitary French outpost and making 'natural' wines, partly from very old vines. I was able to taste some of his wines on my return to London, thanks to his importer Maltby & Greek, and my notes are included with the others. There are some old ungrafted vines scattered around the island but these are not generally for making wine commercially and many are pretty much abandoned.

The climate is hot, dry and windy. At the higher elevations in the centre of the island near Falatados, where most of the vineyards are planted, generally around 400 m (1,310 ft), the rain falls mainly from October to May, typically 700–900 mm (27–35 in), except in dry years such as 2018. For the rest of the year it is very dry and young vines are irrigated for the first three years and sometimes on an occasional basis after that. Vineyards are also located around the villages of Tripotamos and Steni, south west and south east of Falatados respectively, and in Kalloni, further north.

The very strong, dry, cool seasonal winds, the meltemia – *etesiai* in Greek, meaning 'recurring every year' – affect Tinos and Mykonos and the whole of the Aegean Basin from mid May to mid September, but in particular in July and August. In the summer the daily average temperature is 28 °C (82 °F) but wind can bring this down by 3–4 °C (2 °F). While it is cooler at night, it does not get really cold, though snow is not unknown in the winter – 2 m fell three years ago. T-Oinos, arguably Tinos' best-known and certainly its most well-funded wine producer, support their vines with Swedish hardwood stakes that cost €2–3 each, not including shipping.

And the oak trees have to hold on tight.

Soils are 75% sand so easily drained, and not as demanding as the volcanic soils of Santorini. There's also clay and some organic matter and the water table is quite high, which is why T-Oinos installed drainage pipes when they planted their vines (see [Tinos – the tasting notes](#)).

There's no great wealth of indigenous varieties and most of the plantings in the last 20 years have been Greek varieties from other parts of the country, including Assyrtiko, Mavrotragano, Malagousia, as well as some international varieties such as Cabernet Franc. Local varieties such as Potamissi and Mavropotamissi are being trialled, and Volacus are making a good rosé with the table grape Rozaki (for more on this last one, see the Volacus section of [Tinos – the tasting notes](#)).

Proximity to the mainland is an important asset, as is a local population that cares about local food and gastronomy and welcomes tourists who do too, as the Tinos Food Paths annual event so clearly demonstrates.

Unfortunately my trip to Santorini and Tinos with US wine writer Tara Thomas of *Wine & Spirits* magazine and Sofia Perpera, an oenologist and director of Wines of Greece and EDOAO (Greek National Interprofessional Organisation of Vine and Wine), was just a week too early to experience the Food Paths but Sofia (front right in the photo below) went back a week later and described the celebration to me:

‘A few years ago a group of visionary restaurateurs from Tinos decided to get together to promote the amazing gastronomical scene that has developed there as a result of the island’s rich gastronomical heritage. Tinos Food Paths has managed to inspire and create a local movement which has become a testament to collaboration as the activities are run entirely by volunteers.

‘This year’s activities included tastings, cooking demos, masterclasses and presentations by well-known chefs, restaurateurs and other gastronomy experts. The activities culminated with a unique, experiential activity centred in Kalloni, one of the lesser known villages, but one rich in the agricultural traditions of the island. We went back in time several decades into the past as we hiked around farmlands, visited old windmills, threshing floors, old farmers houses, stables, churches, bakeries, *kafeneia* [coffee shops] to experience local traditions. We listened to the stories of local farmers as they displayed photographs and videos while we sampled their products on this incredible journey.

‘The “Magical Circles of Life” was this year’s theme and the weekend culminated with a series of incredible meals showcasing local products and recipes. The local restaurants and the women of Kalloni cooked the food we all enjoyed.

‘More than 350 amazing volunteers were there to help us experience the richness of Tinos’ gastronomical traditions and give hope to the future of Greece’s ancient culinary traditions and warm hospitality. In addition to the founding group of local restaurateurs, Tinos Food Paths has also inspired and energised producers of local agricultural

products, winemakers, beer producers and the tourist industry there. Local stores, restaurants and taverns, coffee places, wineries provided everything from the amazing cheeses, meats and charcuterie, to wines, fresh breads, biscuits, desserts and more. Local musicians and a chorus also got in on the act and a group of charming girls danced to our heart's delight during one of the dinners.

‘It was truly a complete volunteer effort as ferry companies donated tickets, hotels provided accommodation and car-rental companies gave cars free of charge to help with transportation during the activities. 700 students of Tinos (from kindergarten to high school) were a welcome addition to this year's festivities, including the 30+ amazing scarecrows that decorated the hiking route we took. I hope that Tinos is the first of many such examples of co-operation and humility in Greece! ‘

Tinos is also an island with a long history of skilled builders and artists. Tinian craftsmen used to travel all over Greece and beyond, so highly regarded were they, especially for their work with marble, still quarried in the north of the island. Marble has been carved on the island for 5,000 years and there's a museum of marble crafts near the village of Pyrgos.

While we walked around the T-Oinos vineyards I was told the inspiring but melancholy story of Greek sculptor Yannoulis Chalepas, born in Pyrgos in 1851. Having studied in Athens and abroad, he suffered a nervous breakdown in 1878 and eventually spent more than a decade in a mental asylum on Corfu. His mother blamed sculpture for her son's illness and when he returned to Tinos she stopped him working and destroyed everything he made. He began to work again after her death in 1916.

I am happy to say that while the producers I visited on Tinos are putting their heart and soul (and money) into the art and science of wine, they seemed optimistic about the future, enjoying their role as pioneers in the renaissance of Tinian wine, all still growing and learning.

Sofia Perpera is certain this current growth will continue:

'Most wineries are planting from the beginning which is a high cost to begin with but the vineyards are very well taken care of. Not to mention that they are some of the prettiest in Greece! Especially the ones in Falatados with the huge rocks are like from another planet.

'Tourism in Tinos is upscale and unique – neighbouring Mykonos is upscale, extremely expensive and could be anywhere in the world. The local gastronomy is one of the hottest right now in Greece. The church has actually contributed to the upscale tourism because for many years it kept all other tourists, other than the ones going for the church, away. Now that finally the secret about the amazing beauty of the island, the fabulous villages and the local gastronomy is out we see an explosion in building houses and small hotels but in a way that it doesn't affect the scenery. I hope this will remain the case. The island is also rich in agricultural products: cheese, meats and charcuterie (*loutza* is a famous local ham made from pork, sausages with wine and fennel), vegetables and cereal (some of the best tomatoes in Greece, artichokes, capers and caper leaves, artisanal pasta, etc), thyme honey, very interesting spoon sweets made by different fruits and vegetables etc.'

One of the distinctive and deliciously pungent cheeses that we were served on several occasions was *kariki*, aged in a gourd. I wasn't quite so keen on the one aged inside cabbage leaves for 120 days, the greenish one below. (This photo was taken at the very good Marathia hotel and restaurant, where I stayed.)

Time for Tinos, and good tomatoes.