





## Robola

### At a glance

A white grape variety from the island of **Cephalonia** which has started unfolding its virtues and has revealed a wine that has the character of a baby Assyrtiko. It is the dominant white variety of the beautiful Ionian island and covers approximately 165ha of land according to agronomist Gerasimos Danalatos. To a limited degree, it has also been planted in other areas of Greece (approximately 10ha) such as Macedonia (Drama and Kavala), the Peloponnese and Central Greece in the valley of Atalanti. The variety gives the name to the region's *PDO*, *Robola of Cephalonia*. Actually, this is the only appellation for dry wines in Greece that refers to a single variety and not a region. And although this may sound prestigious, **it actually isolates the variety, as it cannot appear on any label outside the PDO region, which is rather strange.**

In Cephalonia, Robola thrives on poor stony soils, sometimes so stony that the Italians called the wine *Vino di Sasso*, meaning "wine of the stones". On the mountainous slopes of Ainos, one can still find many own-rooted, old bush-vines; an ode to its heritage. Robola of Cephalonia is intricately connected with the culture, the local cuisine, residents' daily lives, and tourists on the island.

Robola produces wines that are mostly elegant and complex. They are more reserved on the nose, moderately aromatic with lemon, citrus fruit, grapefruit, and fennel. On the palate, they can be steely or fruitier (depending on

the winemaking approach) always with a fresh vein of acidity, medium body, and alcohol. They are usually unoaked, but can also be partly oaked, as the different styles are progressively being explored.

## History

According to Stavrakas ampelography there are two versions about its origin, with neither yet sufficiently documented. Both have an Italian connection. According to the first, the variety came from Italy, where a variety with the name Ribola Gialla is grown (although no DNA similarity has been shown). According to the other, when the Venetians occupied the island in the 16th century, they found the variety in the area in which it is still cultivated today and took it to Italy.

Either way, it wasn't until 1982 when initially with the **Robola Cooperative** and later with small scale wineries, the variety came to fame, slowly capturing consumers' interest. At the heart of the Robola Wine-Growing zone, dozens of winemakers from the village of Omala and the surrounding areas (Troianata, Vlachata, Mousata, Faraklata, Dilinata) set up the Cefalonian Robola Wine Cooperative, later renamed **Orealios Gaea** (grows 85% of total plantings), in an attempt to protect and promote the vineyard's potential.



[1]

## In the vineyard

According to Vouillamoz, no relation to Ribolla Gialla exists. Wine Grapes suggests that according to Biniari, Robola is genetically very close to **Goustoldi** and **Theiako Mavro**, but this is all we know at present. This evidence strongly suggests that Robola needs to be further researched.

The semi-mountainous terrain rising to almost 800 m (a major part is at 680m [pictured below](#)), with its steep gradients, deters any attempts at mechanised farming. Thus, most viticultural tasks are performed manually and require intensive involvement and care by the vinegrowers.

The dominant soil type of the zone is **gravelly-limestone over a bedrock of clay**. This is mostly found on the slopes, whereas the flatlands commonly include less limestone. Such soils have good drainage, which together with the climate of the area leads to low yields and early maturation (from 15 to 20 August), thus resulting in healthy grapes. This prevents the occurrence of diseases that usually appear after the first rains of September (e.g. botrytis) to which Robola is particularly sensitive. The whole vineyard area is dry-farmed, and this is certainly very rare in Greece. However, in droughts and hot vintages, like 2016 and 2017, this causes problems as the vines are thirsty for water.

Since phylloxera arrived late on the island, in 1998, there is a high percentage of old bush vines; it is estimated that close to 56% are ungrafted. Costas Bazigos from Orealios Gea notes that the phylloxera problem is getting worse year by year. According to Danalatos, if one looks at the whole vineyard area, 1/3 is replanted, 1/3 is in good condition and 1/3 needs replanting. When producers replant, the vines are positioned at distances of 2,20 X 1,20 and are head-trained. This technique is used for poor soils on the slopes; in richer and more fertile ground Cordon de Royat is chosen.

Robola can be considered a moderately vigorous variety that yields 35 hl/ha, on the island. Danalatos suggests

closer to 25 hl/ha in the semi-mountainous vineyards and closer to 60hl/ha in the valley.

Robola is prone to rot and powdery mildew (oidium). This is exactly why it is planted inland in the Valley of Robola at 300-800 m to avoid the coast's humid climate. It favours poor limestone soils on the slopes and is mid-early budding and ripening from the 20th August to 10th September. Grapes on the slopes have a more favourable exposure and ripen earlier, whereas in the valley, and especially near the village of Omala, they are among the latest ripening.

In winter the area records high rainfall (average 1200 mm/year), but summer is dry. However, this is not catastrophic since the summer evenings' temperature drops considerably, as the Ainos mass fosters a wet mountain breeze that helps the plants overcome the thermal shock of the day.

The methods of cultivating Robola have largely remained the same over the years, and this is because the form of the farms has not changed. Agricultural lots are small, and the traditional use of sulfur and copper predominates for disease control. Characteristic for the whole zone is that weed control is managed by soil cultivation (sometimes manually) without herbicides. Producers sometimes apply a traditional technique with inward twisting and tying of shoots locally called "*koutsouniasma*" ([see the second picture below](#)). Danalatos tells us that this is sometimes on poor soils to avoid sunburn and decrease exposure to the sun. It certainly is not the rule.

**Organic farming** is a valid part of the Robola discussion. Petros Markantonatos from the Gentilini winery believes that a sustainable way of cultivation is easier to achieve; on the other hand, 8% from Orealios Gaea vineyards is already certified organic. Danalatos also points out the many bureaucratic issues that discourage small growers and the added costs (although the latter is debatable for small vineyards as studies have shown the opposite). Kiki Siameli, winemaker at Petrakopoulos winery, who cultivates a substantial percentage of the Robola plantings organically, argues that it is a lot of fuss as there is much bureaucracy attached. Moreover, the price of grapes has not increased significantly, which means that growers are not convinced about the benefits of organic farming. Currently, organic grapes' price is close to 1.25 euro/kilo, whereas high-quality non-organic grapes come at 1 euro/kilo.

Evriviadis Sclavos, a pioneer of organic and biodynamic cultivation (not only in Cephalonia but also in Greece), believes that organic farming is an easy task in the right mesoclimates found in the semi-mountainous areas of the zone. "The only issue there is powdery mildew" he continues.



[2]



[3]

## Ampelography

Medium conic, almost diamond-shaped, bunches ([pictured below](#)) of high density with a medium peduncle lignified at its base. The berry is medium to large-sized, spherical, yellow-green to yellow, thin-skinned. The leaf is developed, medium-sized to large, almost round, with three or five lobes. Each bunch weighs around 170 gr.

The variety presents **high clonal variability** with 5 clones under research with Ionian and Thessaloniki University. Sclavos suggests at least four different biotypes. More specifically:

One with compact bunches,

One with loose bunches, which is well suited to humid conditions,

One with a winged, double cluster

One with long cylindrical clusters



[4]

## Terroir

The Robola zone extends from 350 to 800 m altitude and includes several villages, Valsamata is the most important as it carries 80% of the plantings. Others include Fragata, Troianatta, Mousata, Vlahata, Omala, Faraklata, Dilinata.

Some of the most exciting terroirs are located in the high altitudes of Fagias where top-quality fruit is sourced, Lacomatia and Lanou. Gentilini Wild Paths is produced from grapes sourced from Fagias, whereas Lacomatia grapes are used for Petrakopoulos Thymari Petra and Sclavos Lacomatia.

### **Fagias** ([pictured below](#))

Fagias is situated on the slopes of Mt Ainos from 500 to 800 m. Above that, fir trees are growing. It has a favourable western, south-western exposure and faces the sea. It is an early ripening zone due to exposure.

### **Lacomatia** ([second picture below](#))

Lacomatia is inland, with no proximity to the sea, but geomorphology ensures good airflow and keeps the grapes healthy with a low humidity level. Altitude is close to 600 m, and the soils are made up of gravelly limestone. It has a favourable north to south exposure.

**Epanochori and Lanou** ([third picture below](#)). The former includes some very mountainous vineyards and the



latter, which is inland between Dilinata and Fragata, shares the characteristics of Lakomatia, but with more clay in the soil.

These areas have what is needed for the production of healthy grapes and less intervention in the vineyard. The problem lies in hot vintages when the vines become severely stressed because of the low water holding capacity of the free-draining limestone and the intense CaCO<sub>3</sub> concentration (up to 90%).

## Wine Styles

**Classic fruity/mineral:** All wineries produce this style which is the introduction to the variety. Depending on the producer, this can be either fruitier or more mineral.

**Creamy and complex:** Partly oaked resulting in fuller wines (e.g. Wild Paths) or with extended lees ageing. Sclavos uses foudres of 1500L for his Lacomatia wine.

## In the cellar

Indigenous yeasts: Adopted by producers such as Sclavos, Petrakopoulos (in Palia Armakia) and Sarris (in both versions). Siameli is considering using exclusively native yeasts in the new winery, currently under construction, and Sclavos highlights the challenges faced when Robola has over-ripened as stuck fermentation may occur.

Lees ageing: Seems to work well, something seen in the Gentilini R which has undergone 24m on the lees. Sclavos also believes it is important to the ageing of Robola provided the grapes are healthy. His wines see 7-10 months on the lees, which has slowly increased and has reached up to 24months. Siameli makes an important comment about avoiding battonage, since as she says if the grapes are healthy, you get the mouthfeel and taste without the battonage (an oxidative technique). On the other hand, Panos Sarris owner and winemaker at Sarris wines avoids extensive use to preserve fruit purity.

Sclavos adds that, because Robola is a variety that oxidises easily, stainless steel is the most appropriate vessel for fermentation. Wood, on the other hand, needs caution and judicious use not to compromise quality.

Acidification: Performed when needed and depending on the producer's style. Siameli highlights that Robola does not need fine-tuning if worked with care and harvested at the right time. Nevertheless, to avoid acidification, everything needs to be monitored very closely. With some very hot vintages and early ripening sites on the slopes sometimes this is unavoidable. As Sclavos says, fine-tuning is no tragedy, but one will never achieve real balance. And the wine will show a lack of harmony.

Use of sulphites: For a variety that readily oxidises the use of SO<sub>2</sub> at some stage is a one-way ticket. The classic versions see approximately 25 mg/L free SO<sub>2</sub> as a standard treatment, while the more adventurous cuvées aim for 40 to 60 mg in total. Stems can be used to provide antioxidant protection and minimise use of SO<sub>2</sub>.



[5]



[6]



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## Notable Producers

Orealios Gaea (excellent value for money Robola, mineral San Gerassimo)

Gentilini (classic value citrusy-driven Robola, complex Wild Paths, impressive Robola "R")

Petrakopoulos (textbook Robola Classic, 'natural' style Palia Armakia, beautiful single-vineyard Thymari Petra)

Sclavos (layered and structured Vino di Sasso, captivating Lacomatia)

Sarris (hands-off approach in Robola and complex Robola ungrafted)

Foivos (very good fruity Varkarola)

## Ageing Potential

Drink the classic stuff in the first 1-3 years and cellar the more complex one for at least 5-6 years following the harvest.

## Challenges Ahead

- Commercially to engage more consumers
- Clone work and more emphasis on vineyard management by local growers
- More age-worthy wines to raise the status of the variety
- Single vineyard expressions; (for the moment) few wines are from single vineyards
- A change in Greek wine legislation allowing screwcaps for PDO wines is also very much anticipated by the producers who feel that a tighter closure may benefit Robola, retaining freshness for longer
- Release Robola from legislation so that it can be mentioned by other wineries beyond Cephalonia, which use it in blends or for experimental reasons (as they cannot mention it on the label).

## Perfect Pairing

Red Mullet with Robola

Described by Terry Kandylis: I come from the island of Evia, and I always remember the sweet taste of Red Mullet (Barbounia in Greek). A stainless steel Robola, which has freshness and unmistakable fennel, light aniseed character (something that I often find in the variety), together with its lemony acidity and almost Assyrtiko-like minerality will match a pan-fried red Mullet, with fennel and lemon, perfectly.

Photo Credit: Orealios Gaea



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