



Figure 1. Collective work in vine harvesting. Source: Zista Cooperative Winery, Zoinos.

ZITSA WINE HUB

Andreas Nikolovgenis

Zitsa is a village belonging to the north-western region of Epirus in Greece where the homonymous “Zitsa” wine is produced, from the local PDO Debina variety. The location is an aggregation of villages as Chianti or Rioja. The phylloxera pest in the 1970s together with the shift of Greece's economy towards the tertiary sector, led to the fleeing of the population and to the partial cultivation of the land. Despite its small size, Zitsa has a hyperlocal character. The current, milder climate enhances the quality of Debina wine. This coincides with the planned experimental planting of almost 32 extinct local varieties of Epirus vines. These two factors create the momentum for the area's re-planning into a hyper-local centre of wine in Epirus and Greece. This will promote social innovation based on wine production, however with a twist, by introducing complementary programmes of education, culture and sustainable agro-tourism.

Zitsa / wine / agricultur / education / agro-tourism

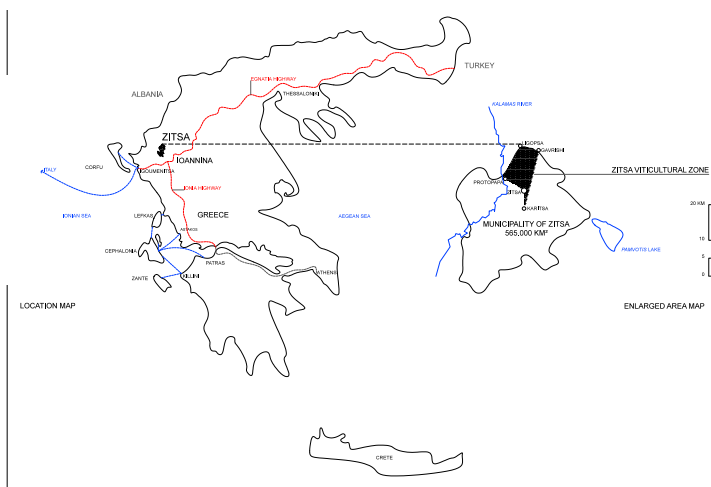


Figure 2. Location map. Source: author.

Zitsa is a village, 25 km west from the city of Ioannina which is the capital of Epirus region and the administrative and financial centre of the North-western Greece, in the crossing of the northern and western highway networks of the country, and in close proximity to the Albania borders and the port of Igoumenitsa that connects Europe to the Balkans and Asia. The village belongs administratively to the homonymous Zitsa municipality whose seat is the village of Eleousa. The municipality is quite large, with an area of 565,000 km² and a population of 15,000 inhabitants and is a result of the merging of former smaller municipalities. It is also quite diverse, containing urban and rural settlements, lowlands and mountainous landscapes, industrial and farming activities, local and moving population. The municipal unit of Zitsa itself, has an area of 65,000 km² and a population of 1,300 inhabitants. Despite its small size, it has schools of all levels and the majority of the public services of a city, which grant to the village a hyperlocal character. Thanks to wealthy locals living abroad, the village acquired an interesting number of public buildings such as a municipal library, a municipal guest-house, an engraving gallery with an important collection and a former dormitory for school students.

The area, which includes six communities/villages (Zitsa, Protopappas, Karitsa, Ligopsia, Klimatia, Gavrishi), has a total cultivated area of 1,700 acres and appears as an aggregation of villages similar to Chianti in Tuscany or Rioja in Spain. Here

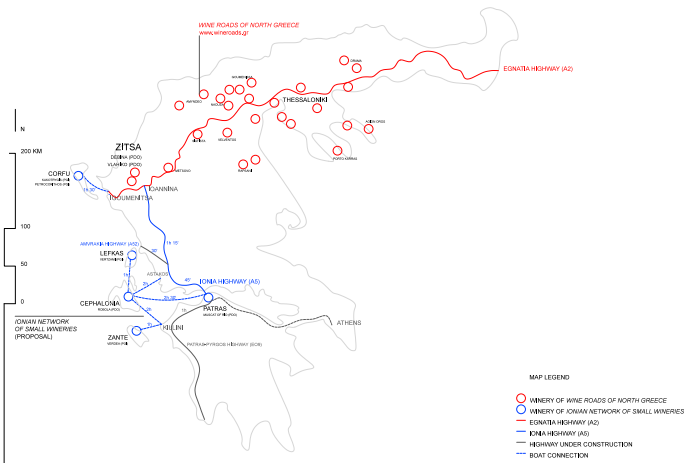


Figure 3. Ionian Network. Source: author.

the homonymous “Zitsa” wine is produced, from the local Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) Debina² variety whose name originates probably from the Italian phrase “de vino”, meaning vines suitable for wine. The PDO recognition has been granted by the State in 1972.³ Zitsa is located at an altitude of 700 m with orientation towards the coasts of Ionian Sea. Its climate is moderate with mild winters and cool summers, because of the winds of the Ionian Sea, which pass through the gorges of Kalamas and Araithos rivers. The area has a high rainfall, except the dry summer months that result to a fertile ground for the cultivation of Debina variety (Kontos, Zikou 1992, pp. 9–11). The most characteristic local wine is a fresh, semi-sparkling orange-white, similar to prosecco, a character which is granted by an old custom; the locals used to store the wine in bottles in late October, afraid of spoil. The fermentation process was not finished at that time and as a result, a second fermentation was happening inside the bottle unleashing carbon dioxide in the form of little sparkles. This local custom is translated by the new vinification process through the French cuvee-close or Charmant method—the one used for champagne as well. Together with Debina, the area produces also the exceptional red Vlachiko and a small production of the red Bekari. Worth mentioning Lord Byron, the famous English philhellene who came in Zitsa during one of his travels in 1809 and stayed overnight in St. Elias monastery drinking the local Kolokythas wine, similar to Debina.⁴

LOCAL VITICULTURE AS DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

Despite the location's long tradition in wine production since the seventh century⁵, the vineyard is relatively new, developed after the phylloxera pest in the 1970s. The new vineyards have been planted with American, resistant rootstocks grafted with tender shoots from the local varieties—mainly Debina (Kontos, Zikou 1992, pp.14–15). The pest and the shift of Greece's economy towards the tertiary sector after 1980, led to the fleeing of the population and to the partial cultivation of the land, which was also a result of the insufficiently developed road network and the lack of an irrigation system, which even today is carried out by tractors transferring the water. Today, the cultivated area remains small, appearing more as a sparse piercing in the landscape, there is no young generation of viticulturers, the average age of the population is quite old, and the permanent population is less than 500 inhabitants. The main causes (Interview Kostas Karambinas 2020) is the high cost of cultivation, mainly because of the inefficient distribution of the land, meaning properties constituted by small, segregated plots; the lack of an irrigation system, necessary especially the first years after planting; the restricted by law forested land covered once by vineyards, and of course the general financial crisis. One could add to this the unattractive atmosphere of the village, expressed mainly by the lack of culture and leisure infrastructure (Baklavaridis 2017).

The main asset of the area is the climate change and precisely the warm, sunny autumns, which enhance the quality of Debina wine, as the grapes remain for a longer period on the vine and ripen better. This appears on recent experiments and studies (Interview Eleni Sindou 2020), and it is also certified by awards in recognised international competitions.

This is coupled by the new legislation frame⁶, voted in 2019, that declassifies the forested lands that were former vineyards and allows for rejuvenation and a cooperative agronomist, covering the need of the producers for consulting and troubleshooting during the cultivation of their vines.

Though, the most important opportunity is the launch of a research programme ran jointly by the local wine cooperative and several agricultural universities of Greece⁷ under which almost 32 extinct local varieties of Epirus vines will be planted in a special test vineyard. The scope of the programme is the research on the respective varieties so to feed future viticulture and reproduce indigenous wines.

VISION

The fact that local wine becomes better, the possibility to cultivate the former forested land and the important research programme set the ground for a vision towards the development of the entire place based on wine. This vision skips heavy infrastructure and legislation issues—as considered the field of other experts—focusing on creating the “social infrastructure” by inviting young people to live and act in the village investing simultaneously on education and tourism. This will be followed by an “architectural infrastructure”—a multi-programmatic community space, ending up with large-scale gestures, even hyperlocal. These “immunizations”, or “grafting”⁸ in the vine’s language, will be launched in a stepped manner or three scales.

Step 1: Small Scale

The first step will commence with the launch of a wine education programme in the form of travelling fellowships referring to students of oenology and agriculture from Greek universities. The focus of the young researchers will be the experimental vineyard with the local varieties of Epirus, their vinification procedures and the performance of the respective wines based on contemporary, technologically aided methods and smart systems. This will be accompanied by an art residency, open for students from the local University’s Fine Arts School. The young artists will work on special large-scale land art works altering the viticultural landscape and promoting the villages’ single identity. At the same time, they will be responsible for the operation of the local engraving gallery, which currently remains closed lacking personnel. The fellowships and the residencies will be supported by a collaborative initiative ran jointly by the universities, the municipality which will cover the living expenses, the cooperative winery and the gallery which will offer the respective objectives and wealthy locals that could offer a stipend in the form of a grant reclaiming the long tradition of the place in donations.

The above-mentioned gestures will allow for a mixture of the local population and the infusion of the village with a young generation able to activate culture and leisure programmes and invite more young people of the area to become viticulturists or entrepreneurs and live there.

This will be coupled by the founding of a single-identity wine festival, spread year-round. The festival will commence with the wine feast every August, including also the end-of-harvest in late September, the tsipouro feast in late November, the wineries open-house in early December which connect Zitsa with other wine-regions in Northern Greece, the new vines planting in April ending up with the local St Elias

feast in July. This network, which can be spread also in the different communities of the area, will act as an extended festival and it will require a single, recognised and memorable graphic and communication identity. The food will be prepared in every feast according to the local work-share method, led by the local women's association and eventually by other local associations related to food. The music will be performed by local traditional bands and events organised by the local University's School of Traditional and Folk Music. All these will be accompanied by seminars by invited experts. The network's organisation will run in collaboration with the producers' team, a group which numbers almost 100 members and since 1980 organises the local wine festival, in late August, attempting to promote Zitsa wine culture as well as to sell their products and strengthen financially the local viticulture. Finally, an agro-touristic product will be released containing participation in the viticultural works (different during each period of the year) together with wine-tasting seminars and visits in historical places and interesting landscapes around but also water sports in Kalamas river. This new "product" alludes to the cultivation of the land itself, and the respective agricultural works in the vineyards, which is a collective work in Zitsa as the producers help each other to cultivate their vineyards diminishing the labour cost. The programme will ask for the cooperation between the municipality, the wineries, the hotels and the restaurants of the village but also with the producers' team and could be provided by several tourist agents from the area and beyond.

Step 2: Medium Scale

The above-mentioned steps will be examined for an adequate period of time according their impact on population change and tourism. If the results are satisfactory the ground will be fertile for the founding of a multi-programmatic social hub for Zitsa and Epirus wine and its respective culture. The hub could occupy the reclaimed former student dormitory, a large 2-storey building, built to accommodate students from the periphery to study in the village's schools—the only in a large and mountainous area. With the development of roads and public transport the necessity for such infrastructures expired and after a short period when the building served as a dormitory for elderly tourists it started decaying. Despite the current state of decay, building's structure and equipment are still in a good shape. Last but not least, the building is located in a symbolic place, on top of the village; therefore it is both visible and overlooks Zitsa and the Kalamas river valley. The ground floor is imagined as an open, "arts and crafts workshop" for the creation of utensils of wine production and consumption as barrels, bottles and pottery but also unique art pieces. The workshop will reclaim old techniques, as for instance

barrel-making, which are described as intangible heritage, though with a twist, enhanced by computer-aided design and fabrication which will allow even for the production of new viticultural tools. The workshop will run by the founding of a community of makers and will provide educational workshops by old craftsmen, artists and young makers from all-over Greece and abroad, referring both to adults and children from Ioannina and beyond. Part of the space will be a gallery with the makers works for exposition and purchase. The space could also accommodate the local engraving gallery, offered by the important local painter Kostas Malamos. This follows a previous idea of Mrs. Efi Malamou, the painter's daughter and chair of the gallery's foundation board. The collection contains more than 450 art pieces of important Greek painters, and it is constantly expanding.

Another part of the hub will be the reclaim of the old professional kitchen and its transformation as a "collective food workshop" operated by the local women's group. The scope of this collective kitchen will be the accommodation of special food and wine pairings, food and wine festivals, collective cooking/ preparations for local feasts but also cooking workshops for visitors and young locals. The idea is inspired by the local feasts, where the preparation of food, mainly pita bread stuffed with vegetables and cheese, is a collective work during which women either cook together or split the materials and the preparation, cooking a portion of a large meal for 2000 people or more. The kitchen, standing as an event space, will promote local cooking traditions but also exchanges with other regions of Greece and abroad, discovering relationships with the Ionian islands and the Balkans and introducing new methods of preparation and altering the local cuisine. The scope of this kitchen is to act as an enclosed public space where people interested with food and wine could meet, cook and discuss.

The first floor arranged in dormitory rooms could be converted into rooms for the wine researchers and artists-in-residence, but also for student excursions, using the well-arranged infrastructure of bathrooms and storage spaces.

Step 3: Large Scale

The multi-programmatic social hub acting on the first hand as a vivid enclosed public space offering to the locals several opportunities for leisure and creativity and on the other as a landmark and destination will increase the fame and value of the place. At this very point will be necessary to apply larger gestures intending to refresh the entire village and unpack interconnections with other places. These could include:

The launch of a municipal programme for free disposal of the state plots to young viticulturers who will commit to live and work in the village for a long period of time following the example of Italian municipalities providing houses for 1 euro to people deciding to live in abandoned villages so as to counter the population outflow and to give a new birth to troubled areas.⁹ This could extend or even combined with abandoned houses with a small rent (even paid by the municipality) enforcing the permanent population. To this scope the existing infrastructure of schools and public services will act as a catalyst while the local market and the construction sector will be enhanced.

The collaborative founding of an “Ionian network” of small wineries which produce indigenous Greek varieties, most of them characterized as emerging, as for instance PDO Rombola in Cephalonia¹⁰, PGI Vertzami in Lefkada¹¹, and PDO Muscat of Rio Patras¹². This could be combined with the active network of Northern Greece wineries “Voroina” with Zitsa standing at the junction between them merging traditions and customs. Interestingly enough the network could follow the path of the Ionia Highway (as “Voroina” follow the Egnatia Highway) activating also a parallel naval route and the respective ports that connect with the islands (as Igoumenitsa, or Astakos, a small fishermen village in Aetolia) suggesting another way to travel in western Greece and interesting cost-inner areas linkages. This network could be coupled by the founding of a tsipouro route, referring only to spirits produced by distillation from grapes, containing all the Epirus region and South Albania, discovering relationships in production and customs and extending to broader cultural exchanges as in food.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the above-mentioned vision based on wine will attempt to promote the whole aggregation of villages, refreshing its population, products, and services and transforming it in a combined educational and touristic destination. This will act as a model for other areas in Greece that produce unique alimentary products creating a new vision for the countryside in Greece as a total. As stated, this is only the framework for research; further in-depth studies informed by discussions with the stakeholders would be necessary.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Municipality of Zitsa, <https://www.zitsa.gov.gr>. [Accessed 02.08.2020].
- 2 See a description of Debina Variety at this link: www.debina.gr [Accessed 02.08.2020].
- 3 Government Gazette 40 /1972. Available on line at: <http://www.et.gr/index.php/anazitisi-fek> [Accessed 02.08.2020].
- 4 Marchand A. L. ed. (2016) *Lordos Vyron, Epistoles apo tin Ellada* [Lord Byron, Letters from Greece]. Athina, Ideogramma.
- 5 PDO Technical File. Available on line at: http://www.minagric.gr/images/stories/docs/agrotis/POP-PGE/OINOS/lista_POP_080119.pdf [Accessed 02.08.2020].
- 6 According to the law 4617/2019 previously cultivated fields now forested if their area is less than 30 acres can be cultivated with respect to their surrounding natural environment.
- 7 "Pyrrou Ampelos" Research Programme, <https://zoinos.gr/> [Accessed 02.08.2020].
- 8 "Grafting" is a process in which a new grape vine is produced by cutting the rootstock and then fitting a scion wood inside the cut. The process's scope is to enhance or/ and change the variety of vine.
- 9 For more information see: <https://1eurohouses.com/case-a-1-euro-houses/>. [Accessed 02.08.2020].
- 10 Wines of Greece. Roboao. Available at: <https://winesofgreece.org/varieties/robola/> [Accessed 02.08.2020].
- 11 Wines of Greece. Vertzami. Available at: http://www.newwinesofgreece.com/lista_ellinikon_poikili-on_ampelou/en_vertzami.html. [Accessed 02.08.2020].
- 12 Wines of Greece. PDO Muscat of Rio. Available online at: PDO Muscat of Rio Patras. [Accessed 02.08.2020].

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