

CLASSIC VINTAGES

There's more to Greek wine than Retsina, as William Sitwell finds when he meets a man producing great wines on an island with a mythical story. Photographs by David Loftus

ICARUS ARRIVED ON THE ISLAND NAMED AFTER HIM IN A somewhat dishevelled state. There he was: washed up on the beach, his seawater-sodden wings half detached from his body after the hot Greek sun had melted their wax and sent him plunging back to earth.

My own arrival was rather less fraught. A smooth and fast hydrofoil from Samos and I alighted at the harbour in Ikaria, my task to find one Georgos Karimalis, 44, winemaker, politician, and possessor of possibly the most resplendent pair of eyebrows in the eastern Aegean.

I track him down towards dusk at his vineyard up in the hills of this small, mountainous island of 7,500 inhabitants, therapeutic hot springs and fertile soil that nourishes olives, almonds and apricots as well as grapes. Georgos's red wine is made from a mixture of Fokiano and Koudouro grapes, his white mostly made up of the Begleri variety. His main concern this warm evening, though, is not his wine but a speech he is due to make later on in the town square to garner support for his bid to become the island's mayor.

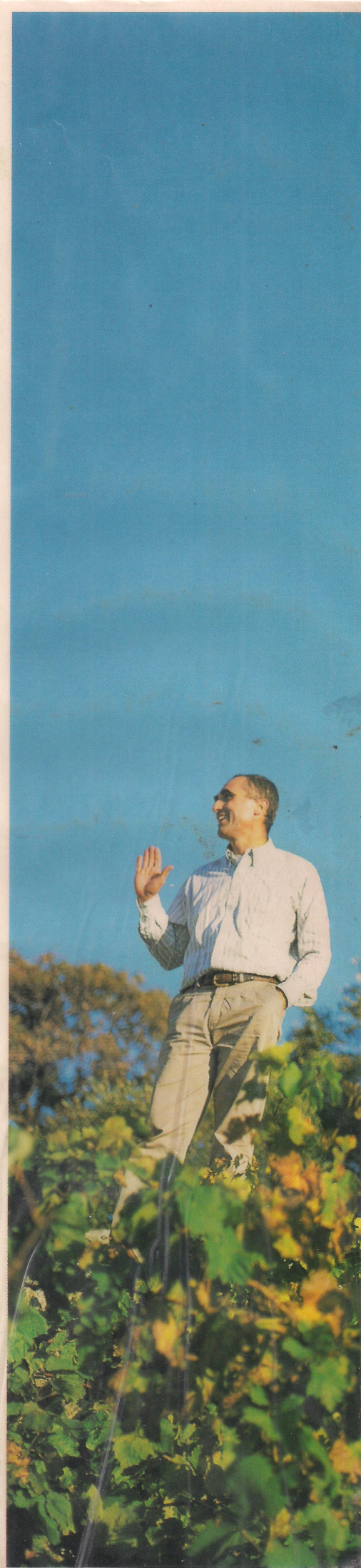
"I represent the centre ground in politics, for the logical people," says Georgos. "I want to encourage economic development and modernisation. The people of this island need a mayor who can offer advice and organise things. We need to improve transportation and start businesses. We must make our dreams come true and we must create. And to create is a miracle; it proves that we are really men. I'm the only candidate who can do these things. Look at my opponents: they are old-fashioned communists, enemies of the European Union. But they no longer know what they want. Their mother is dead and they are orphans now."

Yeah, yeah, yeah but what about your wine?

"Wine is mysterious, and we cannot always explain it with words..."

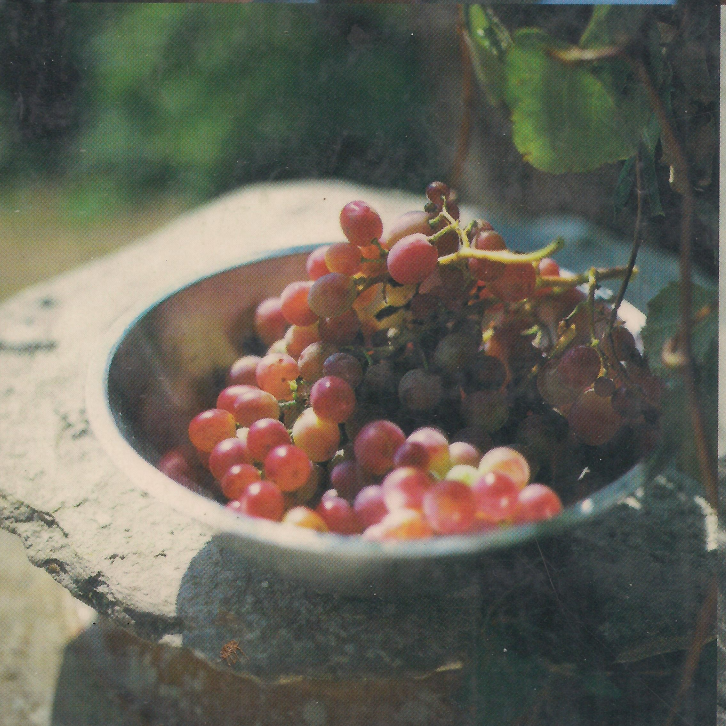
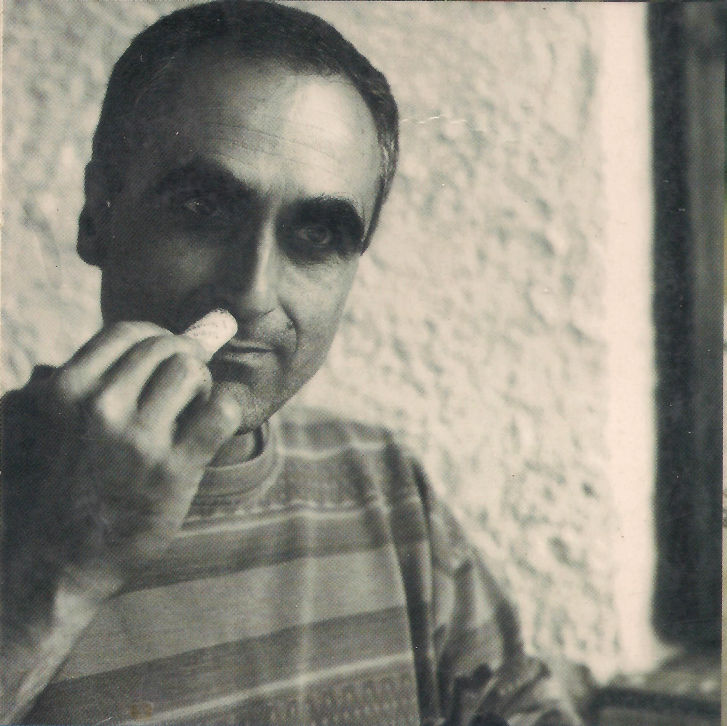
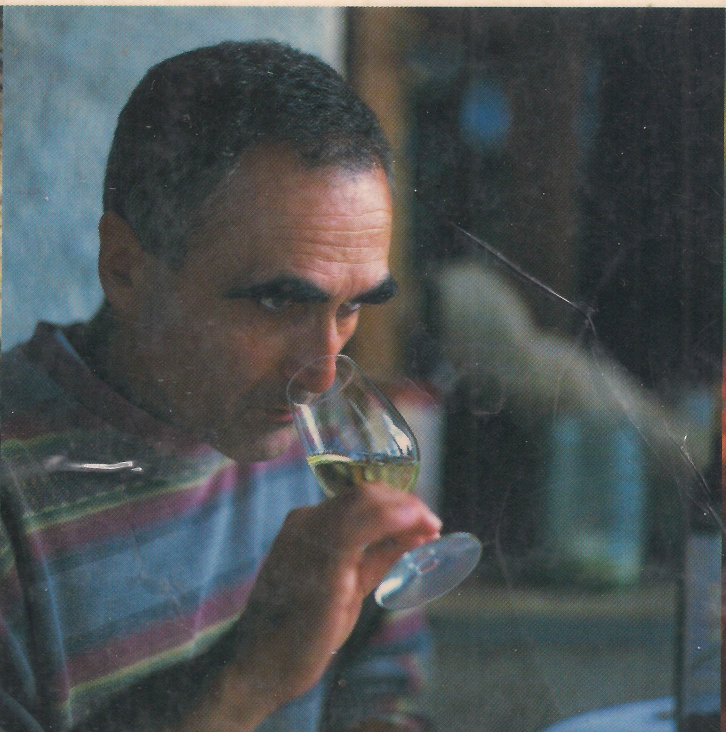
Sure, but I'm getting thirsty.

"The grape is a child of the sunshine, the wine a child of the darkness and the cold," he continues enigmatically,



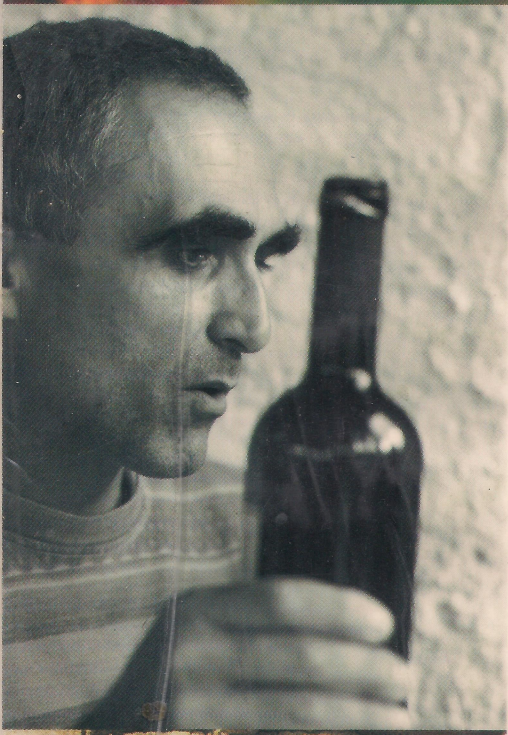
Georgos Karimalis, right, among the grapevines from which he produces "underrated" wines on Aegean island of Ikaria







Pramnian wines, as the wines from Ikaria are called, have an ancient heritage – they were mentioned by Homer in *The Iliad*. Georgos is carrying on a family tradition of winemaking that stretches back for generations



as he leads me down from the vineyard to the old stone house where his family has lived for 500 years. Georgos's forefathers were the subjects of the Ottoman emperor Suleiman the Magnificent, who gave his people land to cultivate, for which they paid him in raisins. A large wall, typical of Ikaria, shields the house from the sea. In days long gone, walls such as this prevented passing nocturnal pirates spotting lights on the island and returning the following day to launch a vicious raid.

Georgos's wife, Helene, ushers us out onto the terrace. She plays her part in this cottage industry, too, glueing on labels, sticking on foil and filling up flasks for the locals who like to buy their wine in bulk. Helene works in the small and recently built warehouse, with its modern presses, steel vats and bottling facility. There is an old stone press just below the terrace but it is rarely used today.

Seated by a small table with some morsels of bread and goat's cheese, we prepare to taste the wine. Georgos draws out the cork from a bottle of his white. "Europe does not know how good Greek wine is; we deserve a better reputation," he says. We taste it. It's redolent of the Loire with a light hint of flowers and herbs. Then we try the red. It tastes like a smooth, medium-bodied Rioja.

"I make the wine that I like," he continues. "It's simple. In life simplicity is the key." I sip my wine and gaze out from the shady terrace, down the verdant hills and out to a dark blue sea that shimmers into the distance.

A small gecko scampers silently across the stone floor, catching Georgos's attention. "You see that lizard? That is what is left from dinosaurs. They were punished and were made to be small."

Erm, yes, can I try some more of that white?

"Of course, you are a free man. And that is what I represent in politics. I support freedom."

I take another sip. He'd get my vote.

For information on travelling to Ikaria, turn to page 101. WFI travelled to Ikaria with Laskarina Holidays (see page 10 for a voucher to save money on breaks with Laskarina). For your chance to win a two-week holiday to Ikaria, or any other island featured in Laskarina's current brochure, turn to page 32.