Appearing on Gary Vaynerchuk's webcast 'Wine Library TV' (below) helped Markus Stolz's effort to promote Greek wines worldwide.

GRAPE POWER

Out of pure curiosity, Markus Stolz, the blogger who has made it his mission to initiate the rest of the world to fine Greek wines, recently asked the owner of a taverna in Laconia, in the Peloponnese, about the kind of quantities of bottled wine he sells to his diners per season.

"Not even a hundred bottles," the taverna owner replied. "I do sell plenty of house wine, however. Over 1,200 kilos."

"Overall, Greeks are used to drinking wine with their food," said Stolz. "Very rarely will you come across a table in a taverna without half a kilo of house wine in a jug. Up to a few years ago, however, there was no wine culture. This is changing rapidly. One idea would be for producers to come up with decent house wines, so that what is served in local tavernas reflects the country's wealth when it comes to wine."

As for his own wine picks, one of Stolz's favorite grape varieties is the robust Xinomavro.

"The Agiorgitiko variety is also capable of producing great wines. The one I consider of truly international level, however, is the Assyrtiko of Santorini. It's sensational. Other grape varieties which stand out are Malagousia, Roditis and Moschofilero, all of which can turn into great wines, provided they fall into capable hands," said Stolz passionately. "Your power lies in your varieties."

It is worth noting that Stolz promotes wines he appreciates and does not receive funding from Greek wine producers or the Greek state.

A German ambassador of Greek wines

Independent specialist Markus Stolz aims to promote local labels abroad

BY **LINA GIANNAROU**

The night I met Markus Stolz turned out to be a sleepless one for him. Though his eyes were closing, there he was typing away all night long. The amount of e-mails, Facebook messages and tweets he had just received was simply staggering. He could have responded to them the next day but just like with grape harvesting, there was no time to lose.

Earlier in the day, Stolz had appeared in an episode of "Wine Library TV," a highly influential webcast hosted by cyberspace wine guru Gary Vaynerchuk. During the show, Stolz had presented three Greek wines: an organic Malagousia, a blend of Syrah, Mourvedre and Grenache Rouge bottled in Crete, and a Xinomavro from the northern city of Naoussa. The maverick American host seemed genuinely excited, especially for two out of the three bottles. Before the episode was over, the first orders for Greek wines had already made their way into Stolz's inbox.

Who would have thought that a German economist would drop his high-flying career in finance – his last stop had been at Goldman Sachs in London – to move to Greece and get involved in the promotion of Greek wines in global markets?

Well, that's what love does to people and Stolz now lives with his Greek wife Alexandra and their four children in Athens, where he has taken on a role of unofficial ambassador of the country's oenological culture via his online business, www.eloinos.com, aided by his "surgical" exploitation of online social networking.

Spread the word

'As I go on, I realize that if we want the rest of the world to appreciate our wine, first we must learn to love it at home'

As with most success stories, this one also came about when a hobby turned into a profession.

"For more than 20 years I was an oenophile, to the point of enrolling and graduating with distinction from a wine school in Germany, but I was totally absorbed in my career back then," said the 44-year-old Stolz, speaking from a village in the Peloponnesian prefecture of Ilia, where he was vacationing with his family – though without neglecting to keep in touch with fans of his business via Facebook and Twitter.

"When I started living in Greece, I was really taken by Greek wines," he said. "The more I sampled, the more I appreciated the unbelievable range of local wine varieties which were off the beaten track. At the same time, I realized how the quality of wines was improving year by year. They stole my heart."

A year-and-a-half ago, Stolz decided to contribute toward the improvement of the international profile of Greek wines.

"Quality is good, prices are good, so why is it that they aren't being exported? Less than 10 percent of local production leaves the country, while 70 percent of exports involves five major producers – in other words, not necessarily the top-quality wines," said Stolz.

"There are a number of small producers, however, that are coming up with standout wines. Clearly there's some kind of mistake in the marketing of Greece on the oenological level."

Stolz started out by creating the website, giving it an international orientation and an informative character in terms of the local grape varieties and the kind of flavors they render.

Facebook and Twitter were up next, with Stolz locating and getting in touch with the country's leading wine personalities. It was no easy task. The misunderstanding surrounding Greek wines is powerful. Stolz had to put pressure on people and persuade them that there's more to the Greek wine industry than retsina and Mavrodafni. During the first six months, the response to his efforts was minimal.

"I persisted, however, to the point of turning into 'that crazy German' who is always writing about Greek wines on Twitter," said Stolz. "But it worked, and the whole thing started generating interest. I organized wine tastings in Germany, the United States and Britain and started establishing contacts among wine producers, merchants and retail outlets abroad."

Following his recent appearance on Vaynerchuk's show, it seems that Greek wine is now on its way.

"Thankfully, the results are now coming in," said Stolz. "As I go on, however, I realize that if we want the rest of the world to appreciate our wine, first we must learn to love it at home."