

CYPRUS



Vinous Treasure Island



With an abundance of rare, indigenous grape varieties, favourable climate, and eclectic range of terroirs, Cyprus is well placed to compete in the global wine-producing marketplace

CYPRUS ticks all the boxes in an age when wine drinkers are looking for authenticity and a sense of discovery, but not at the expense of accessibility. With evidence of winemaking on the Mediterranean island as far back as 6,000 years ago, a rich choice of rare, indigenous grape varieties, and a landscape engineered to accommodate the 2.5 million tourists that flock to its shores each year, it is quickly apparent Cyprus can meet the key desires of today's consumer.

Its wine industry, once rightly described as antiquated, is fast-

modernising, allowing producers to capture the flavours of grapes grown on an island with a large and eclectic range of terroirs. A winemaking revolution has been led by a core of energetic small-scale producers, encouraged by an emerging domestic demand for high-quality products, as well as a tourist keen to experiment. The island's largest wineries have swiftly followed, improving their output in an attempt to compete at home and in world markets. Accession to the EU has also acted as a catalyst for change, ensuring international quality criteria are met, appellation

of origin laws and boundaries set, and subsidies allocated to winery improvements, not sheer weight of grapes.

In short, a definite qualitative vinous direction is emerging for Cyprus. The country is clear on what styles of wines it can best produce, which varieties it should use, where it should plant, and how it should promote. In particular, wine routes have now been mapped, incorporating a growing number of increasingly elaborate cellar door operations, including shops, museums, restaurants and even hotels. All that's needed is

international recognition for its leading wine styles and top producers.

And when it comes to styles, certain vinous strengths are clearly apparent. Firstly, there is no doubt Cyprus has the climate to produce world-class sweet wines. Its most famous product and export, Commandaria, is testament to this, but so too are the island's rapidly proliferating sweet Muscats. Then there's rosé. Cyprus appears highly adept at producing richly coloured and flavoured rosés from a range of varieties, including indigenous ones such as Maratheftiko, and even the widely planted Mavro.

Certainly when it comes to native grapes, the country has identified those with the greatest quality potential, white and red, and is growing plantings, ensuring there is a real sense of place to the wines produced.

International varieties also flourish in Cyprus, which in places has near perfect viticultural conditions. In particular, comparisons with those in the southern Rhône support the

success winemakers are having with varieties from this French region, for instance Syrah, Grenache and Mouvedre. When it comes to whites alone, certain winemakers are soon to trial the Rhône's Viognier, but already, the local Xynisteri grape produces refreshing medium-bodied wines on its own or blended with varieties such as Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and

Chardonnay. And the latter grape, barrel-aged, can produce wines of global appeal.

Overall, replanting and modern machinery, coupled with a new generation of enthusiastic and internationally trained oenologists, are ensuring the increasing production of approachable and complex wines. Crucially, these still have a clear sense of place achieved from unique viticultural

conditions and the blending of the international with the indigenous.

Future developments will no doubt focus on viticultural advancements such as clonal selection, but for now, modern winemaking methods are ensuring Cyprus is well placed to compete on the global marketplace, and with a clear point of difference both in terms of style and story.



Going native

Cyprus's high quality indigenous grapes offer the key to the island's viticultural future. But the likes of Xynisteri and Maratheftiko are not yet recognised by the target markets, so winemakers are creating blends using well-known international grapes

WINEMAKERS in Cyprus are united on how to develop the island's viticultural future – and it involves drawing on the past. Producers large and small agree it is the country's indigenous grapes that offer the most potential for quality wines with a point of difference, and it is a good product plus sense of provenance, as anyone in sales and marketing will stress, that is crucial to unlocking international sales.

However, despite evidence of

winemaking in Cyprus as far back as 4,000 BC, the varieties traditionally used are new to the global market. Whether it is the mainstream Mavro or upmarket Maratheftiko, consumer recognition, even among wine enthusiasts, is notably lacking.

There is of course a solution, and one increasing numbers are using. This is to blend the local with the international – a technique employed worldwide when the indigenous ingredients are unknown to the target audience.



In Cyprus's case, there is already a history, albeit relatively recent, of planting international varieties such as Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Add to these, new arrivals Shiraz and Sauvignon Blanc, and Cyprus has a rich range of fashionable grapes to blend with its most prized native varieties, providing a hook on which to catch a curious consumer.

In whites, Cyprus benefits from the widely planted Xynisteri grape, producer of appealing, citrus fruit wines with medium body. The

results are best drunk young and can be prone to low acidity, although this can be corrected or naturally boosted by planting at high altitudes. Mountain viticulture is something Cyprus offers in abundance with some of the highest vineyards in Europe, peaking at 1,480m. At over 800-900m, Xynisteri achieves not only higher acidity but also an attractive mineral edge, due to the cooler temperatures, especially at night.

Nevertheless, for some, the best whites from Cyprus, both in terms

of taste and on-shelf consumer appeal, are those where an international grape has been added to the mix.

Some have opted for Riesling, and others, such as Tsiakkas, Sauvignon Blanc, while Fikardos and Aes Ambelis wineries are producing pleasing results with a 15% peppering of Semillon. George Tripatas, managing director at the latter producer, who buys his Xynisteri from Cyprus's highest vineyards at Kyperounda, says, "We tried Xynisteri with Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, but found our best results with Semillon."

It's also worth noting that certain producers, such as Krelan Winery (or Kyperounda with its Petritis), are making Xynisteri with partial barrel maturation, while other native grapes Promara and Spourtiko are experiencing something of a revival.

In reds, Cyprus's most planted native variety, Mavro, is easy to grow; it is used in Commandaria, and can produce deeply coloured rosé, while some suggest it could make a light Beaujolais-like red by employing carbonic maceration.

However, Cyprus is pinning hopes on the potential of indigenous grape Maratheftiko. Producer of wines with deep colour, an attractive floral scent and a range of styles from light and fruity to rich and extracted, plantings are slowly increasing. The grape does suffer from one setback, however – it is one of the few grapes that is non-hermaphroditic, making pollination troublesome, and hence it is prone to uneven flowering and poor fruit set. Different producers present varying solutions, some planting mixed vineyards to ensure pollination occurs evenly. All are agreed, however, that the best Maratheftiko-based wines use grapes grown at higher altitudes.

INDIGENOUS VARIETALS

► Cyprus is one of the few places in the world which benefits from a complete absence of phylloxera. This has ensured the survival of a rich range of indigenous grape varieties almost never found beyond the island's shores – as many as 16 native grapes have been recorded.

In terms of quality, the most promising varieties include the white grape Xynisteri and red grape Maratheftiko. Excitement also surrounds Lefkada, although its origin is believed to be the Greek island of Lefkada where the grape is called Vertzami.

Mavro, meaning black, is also native to Cyprus and the island's most planted variety with 5,700 hectares, while Ofthalmo, is an indigenous red varietal covering 170 hectares, and producer of light-coloured wines.

Presently, 150 hectares are planted to Maratheftiko although this is increasing year on year as more producers invest in this variety, enchanted by the wines it produces and tempted by the potential for greater quality when planted at high altitudes.

For example, according to Nicos Nicolaides from Domaine Nicolaides, "The best area for Maratheftiko is Omodos, because here it is planted above 900m."

He and others also suggest this variety could do well in blends with international grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon, as well as Merlot, or even Syrah. Perhaps there is the potential to promote a Cyprus blend similar to South Africa's Cape Blend. The latter country has made a name for its unique mix of native Pinotage and Bordeaux grapes.

Overall, many compare the viticultural conditions in Cyprus to those in southern Rhône, in particular the likes of Chateauneuf du Pape and Tavel, which supports the success Cyprus is having with Syrah, Mouvèdre and rosés made with Grenache. In particular, Syrah, or Shiraz as producers prefer to call and label it in Cyprus, is provoking much interest, and University of California Davis-trained Cypriot winemaker Sophocles Vlassides says that if Cyprus did create an iconic wine, it would be a Shiraz blend – possibly with Maratheftiko. “Everything that does well in the Rhône does well in Cyprus,” he

says, “and at the moment we are experimenting with red varieties but the next step will be with white varieties from the Rhône and the top Greek grapes.”

Also slowly appearing is the practice of matching particular varieties with certain terroirs and experimenting with varying vineyard management techniques. Following this will be clonal selection which should ensure further progress.

In the meantime, it appears Cyprus is improving the wines made with its native grapes, and producing appealing blends with the help of better-understood international varieties.

CLIMATIC CHARACTERISTICS

► Cyprus is the warmest island in the Mediterranean due to its geographic position – it is only 300 miles from Egypt to the south.

However, mitigating this climatic situation is altitude. The Troodos mountain range which accounts for around one half of Cyprus, with Mount Olympus at its 1,953m peak, has a crucial cooling effect on the country’s vineyards.

Mean daily summer temperatures are at least 5 degrees Celsius lower on the Troodos foothills than on the central plain or coastline, and mountain breezes and low rainfall ensure not only grape acidity is maintained but few diseases affect the country’s vines. Furthermore, a complete absence of phylloxera means ancient bush vines litter the landscape.

In short, growers in Cyprus can easily convert to organic viticulture, while low yielding mountain vineyards mean the country occupies an unusual position: it has a hot climate but produces wines with high acidity.

The wine makers

A snapshot of some of Cyprus’s pioneering wineries

Tsiakkas

Tsiakkas was founded by ex-banker Costas Tsiakkas in 1988 and is one of Cyprus’s first boutique wineries. Situated at an altitude of 1000m in the Pitsilia region of the Troodos Mountains, this high-quality and pioneering producer notably vinifies a 100% Sauvignon Blanc and is considering increasing its plantings of this international varietal, which it also uses in a blend with the local Xynisteri grape.

Tsiakkas also produces an oaked and an unoaked Chardonnay, an organic and a non-organic Cabernet Sauvignon, a Grenache rosé and a Vamvakada, which is the local name for the indigenous red grape, Maratheftiko.

The winery is looking to increase its presence in foreign markets and already exports to the US,

Switzerland, the UK and Greece. Currently 140,000 bottles are made each year with the help of an oenologist from Greece called Lefteris Mohianakis.

Lambouri

Lambouri is named after founder and winemaker Christakis Lambouris who still oversees the annual production of 80,000 bottles at the age of 67. He began the business in 1988 in the village of Kato

Platres in the Troodos Mountains, and sold the winery to Bolita Trading in 2001, the same year he completed the construction of a new winery with a 300,000-bottle capacity, equipped with two rotofermentors.

Forty per cent of production is made using grapes from Lambouri’s own vineyards and Christakis Lambouris specialises in blends of indigenous and international varieties, for example

Xynisteri and Riesling, or Grenache and Maratheftiko (rosé).

He favours light, food-friendly wine styles, for example his Xynisteri has an ABV of 11%, and would like to bottle under screwcap for whites, but is concerned by the low-value image of this closure in the local market.

Currently Lambouri wines can be found outside Cyprus in the US, Israel and Germany.

Ayia Mavri

By accident, not design, Ayia Mavri is a sweet Muscat specialist of note. A Muscat surplus in 2004 forced winemaker and owner Yiannoula Ioannidou to leave excess grapes in the sun to reduce volumes before vinifying the raisined result.

The ensuing wine was entered into the Muscats du Monde





competition where it gained a gold medal and the producer, based in the Kilani village at 1,100m in the Troodos foothills, has been making sweet Muscats ever since, and exporting them worldwide.

Ayia Mavri's first wine was made in 1983 and winery built in 1986. Currently 50,000 bottles are made each year from a variety of grapes, including Xynisteri, Riesling, Grenache, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, and plans are in place to further expand the production of the prettily-packaged sweet Muscats.

Vardalis

Almost €2 million have been lavished on the impressive stone clad Vardalis winery and visitor centre in the Kilani village in the Troodos foothills. The new cellar was finished in 2002, while 2006 saw the addition of a terrace with far reaching views, as well as a tasting and a function room.

Production has risen from 20,000 bottles in 2002, Vardalis's first vintage, to a current figure of 100,000, while the winery has the capacity to make 200,000 bottles – and is aiming to slowly increase production to this level.

Vardalis is a self-professed Maratheftiko and Cabernet Sauvignon specialist, but also shows expertise with Shiraz and the white Xynisteri. Currently 50% of the wine produced is from the winery's own vineyards. Export markets include the UK, where the wines have a loyal following in Cypriot restaurants.

Fikardos

One of the largest independent regional wineries is Fikardos with a production of 300,000 bottles. Presently based in the Mesogi industrial area just outside Paphos, owner Theodoros Fikardos has historically made wine entirely from bought-in grapes but has recently purchased 40 hectares in the

Arodes Village (650m) in the Akamas Laona region, 20km from the current winery. Here he plans to plant a mix of international varieties such as Shiraz and Sauvignon Blanc and indigenous grapes Xynisteri and Maratheftiko.

He also hopes to finish a new winery on the site by 2011 with the capacity to produce 300,000 bottles.

Presently his most popular wines include a Xynisteri-Semillon blend (and next year he will experiment with a Chardonnay-Xynisteri mix), 100% Maratheftiko, 100% Cabernet Sauvignon and Lefkada-Cabernet Sauvignon dual varietal.

Fikardos exports small quantities to markets such as Germany, Switzerland and Russia but sells mainly to hotels, restaurants and retailers in Cyprus, and mostly in Paphos.

SODAP

SODAP is one of Cyprus's four large-scale historic wineries and a

cooperative uniting as many as 10,000 growers, vinifying almost 4m litres of wine. Founded in 1947 with its base in the city of Limassol, in 2004 it moved its winemaking operations to a new winery called Kamanterena among the vineyards of the Paphos mountains, just outside the Stroumbi village.

Notably SODAP is the producer of the Island Vines brand, begun in 1997 in partnership with British retailer The Co-op, with the support of UK agent and importer Bottle Green. At its peak, Island Vines sold 1m bottles of white and red wines through the UK supermarket.

Germany is SODAP's third largest market, after Cyprus and Britain, and the north European country currently consumes 500,000 litres of SODAP's wines. The cooperative uses local and international varietals, and makes a number of internationally oriented lines which are endorsed by a littering of medals from global wine competitions.

Youni Panayias

Youni Panayias must have one of the best views in Cyprus. Perched on a mountain side at 850m it has an uninterrupted outlook across the island and over the surrounding vineyards of the Panayia region in the Paphos district. Ideally placed for both winemaking and tourism, the winery has invested €5m in a new complex for visitors. Almost finished is a tasting centre and a small museum.

The winery, founded in 1987, produces 500,000 bottles per year and exports small quantities to the UK. Owner Andreas Kyriakides is currently adding Shiraz and Chardonnay to his plantings of mostly indigenous varieties.

Kalamos

Kalamos, like Youni Panayias, has bold plans to increase its on-site facilities for tourists. The family-run business is moving from its current site in the quiet Amargeti village in the Paphos district to a new plot further up the road where there is space for a larger winery and a restaurant.

Expansion plans are being boosted by the energetic input of owner Thalys Ignatiou's son, Thanasis.

Currently Kalamos is making 60,000 bottles each year, which consist primarily of Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon as well as indigenous grapes Xinisteri and Maratheftiko.

KEO

KEO is the largest wine producer on Cyprus, vinifying as many as 3m bottles each year. Founded in 1927, it is one of the big four original vinous operators on the island, and exports 10% of its production, 80% of which goes to Britain, through agent Ehrmanns.

The company concentrates on indigenous varieties such as Maratheftiko and Xynisteri, often blended with international grapes, and makes a range-topping single varietal Maratheftiko called Heritage, sold in a gift box.

Currently KEO owns 50 hectares of vineyard but plans to increase this as part of a push towards quality wine production. It is also the proud owner of the only machine harvester on the island.

In 2005, KEO moved its winemaking operations from Limassol to its Mallia estate in the Troodos Mountains, and plans to shift its bottling line to this site too, according to winery manager George Metochis.

Domaine Nicolaides

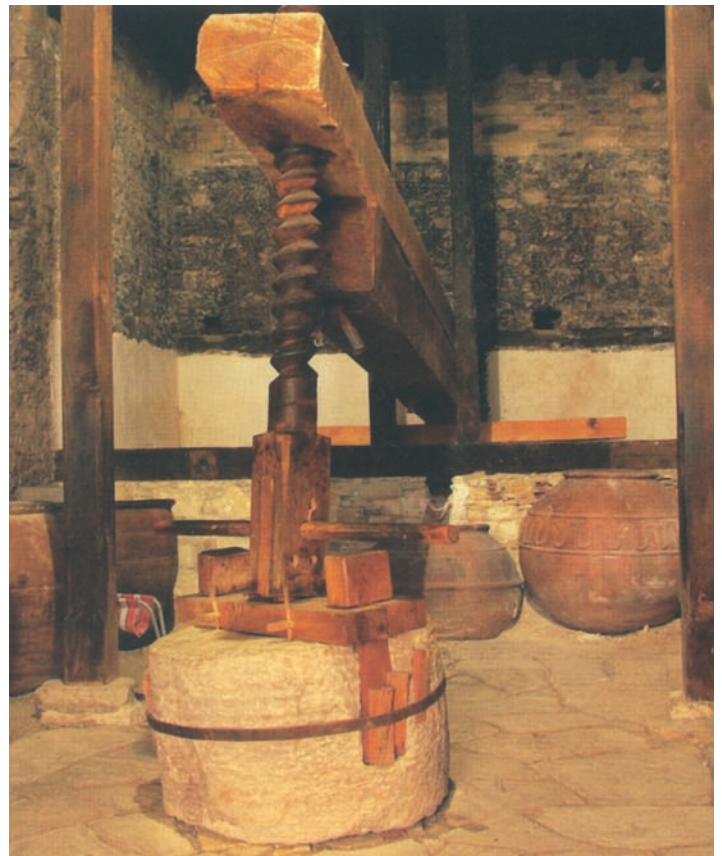
Tucked away in the pretty village of Anogyra (Limassol district) is one of the most impressive small wineries in Cyprus. Named after its founder, the winery was started in 1986, and is now run by his grandson, Nicos, who was trained at the Montpellier school of viticulture and oenology, and heads up the Bacchus Association of Regional Wine Producers of Cyprus.

Of the 100,000 bottle production, Nicolaides has developed repute for its rich, sweet Muscat, Grenache rosé, Maratheftiko and range-topping Conte Nicolaides label – a Cabernet Sauvignon/Cabernet Franc blend.

Currently Domaine Nicolaides exports 5-10% of its production to the US, UK and German markets.

Aes Ambelis

Aes Ambelis stands out not only because it is miles from any neighbouring winery but also because of the modern, simple and elegant architecture employed in its design. The €2m building, completed in 2000,



alongside the road from Nicosia to Palehori, comprises a round wine barrel, and glass fronted tasting room.

Founder George Tripatas began making wine as a hobby in 1993 and committed to building the current winery in 1998. He then quit his job as an investment banker in 2001 to devote his full attention to the business, which now amounts to 200,000 bottles.

Aes Ambelis is producing impressive results with both indigenous and international varieties, including a Xynisteri/Semillon blend, barrel-fermented Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and a red blend with Cabernet Sauvignon/Mouvèdre/Lefkada/Maratheftiko. He also makes a sweet Muscat and Cabernet Sauvignon/Grenache/Maratheftiko rosé which was, according to

Tripatas, voted the best wine in Cyprus, when he released the first vintage, a 2006.

The winery exports to Germany and Switzerland, as well as Britain through UK agent Vernon Wines.

Krelan

Yiannakis Christoudias is both owner and winemaker at Krelan Winery. He produces 80,000 bottles under the Krelan label, 10% from his own vineyards, although he hopes to increase that to 50% with newly leased land.

Currently there are six wines in the range including an oak aged Xynisteri, dry Muscat, medium-sweet Muscat, red blend, Cabernet Sauvignon and Maratheftiko.

Although 1999 was Krelan's first "official" vintage, Christoudias has been making wines for friends and family since the early 90s.

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