



The Revival of Cretan Wines: Delicious Discoveries from the Aegean

By Peter Csizmadia-Honigh

London—There's so much to offer in the world of Greek wine. If you haven't already, it's time to immerse yourself in Greek wines and discover the exciting tastes and flavors of indigenous Cretan grape varieties in particular.

History

Crete stretches 155 miles in the Mediterranean with its shores washed by the Aegean Sea in the north and the Libyan Sea in the south. The landscape is varied—ragged snow-capped mountains stretch from west to east, prairie-like fields sit on the slopes and azure blue bays with small fishing villages or hustling and bustling port towns dot the shore. It's justifiably a paradise for tourists from late spring till mid-autumn. Here, the cultural heritage is as colorful as the natural

surroundings.

Wine-making had already flourished as early as the Minoan Kingdom, as it is witnessed by the 3,500-year old grape press found in Vathipetro. Another vinous artifact bearing witness to the culture of wine from the 5th century BC, is the law codex of Gortyn, which also includes regulations on wine growing. However, the rise of the Byzantine Empire meant the decline of wine. It was with the Venetian conquest of Crete that wine production surged, with exports growing from 20,000 barrels in 1415 to 60,000 in 1669. The Turkish occupation brought an end to the flourishing trade and it was not really until the 1970s that the Cretan wine industry began to bounce back.

Indigenous Wines Go Forth

Competition is tough in the global marketplace and a wine region can be successful only if it offers wines that nobody else can. So I was pleased to see that Wines of Crete, the generic promotion body of the local producers, places a great emphasis on indigenous varieties. Recently, I visited six wineries, tasting a total of 90 wines from 18 wineries. Here are my top picks.

Vilana

According to the local winemakers, this is the flagship variety of Crete, but I would challenge them and urge them to reconsider in favor of Thrapsathiri. Vilana is a widely-planted and popular variety. It produces medium-bodied, zesty fresh wines with relatively restrained aromatics, which you can thoroughly enjoy by the glass on a hot day or when you are having a salad with grilled calamari or octopus. Recommendations: Lyrarakis—Vilana 2011, Dourakis—Vilana 2011 and Anoskeli—Vilana/Vidiano/Asyrtiko blend 2011.

Vidiano

This variety yields somewhat fuller bodied wines, with aromatics

of apricot and citrus fruit, making it reminiscent of Viognier. Quite a few producers leave Vidiano longer on fine lees, helping to build the body and enhance complexity. Some wine growers blend it with other local or international varieties. It's an excellent accompaniment to meals. Recommendations: Silva Daskalaki Grand Collection White 2011—Vidiano/Chardonnay, Tamiolakis—Vidiano/ Plyto 2010 and Alexakis—Vidiano 2011.

Thrapsathiri

A truly flavorful wine with a lovely weight of body, Thrapsathiri is most definitely a wine for food. It's grown throughout Crete, but there is a smaller quantity of varietal bottling of it on the market, which is a shame, as it's just amazingly good. When blended, it marries well with Chardonnay and makes a good match with creamy dishes or poultry and white fish. Recommendations: Idaia—Thrapsathiri/ Chardonnay (80-20%) 2011, Efroseni—Thrapsathiri/Chardonnay (60-40%) 2011 and Lyrarakis—Thrapsathiri 2011.

Mandilari és Kotsifali

These two varieties are like twins—they belong together, so they're often blending partners. Mandilari is a variety with large bunches dotted with smaller berries and the resultant wine is very strongly structured with firm tannins and heaps of spice. Kotsifali has both large berries and bunches, and it produces juicy and fruity wines, similarly to Merlot in Bordeaux or Napa. It was the Lyrarakis family who introduced these indigenous red wines to the international markets when they started to produce a blend of Kotsifali and Syrah. Recommendations: (single varietal): Lyrarakis—Kotsifali 2009 and Lyrarakis—Mandilari 2008; (blended): Tamiolakis—Profesi Red 2009, Kotsifali/Syrah, unfiltered and Mediterranean—Mirambelo 2010, Kotsifali/Mandilari.

Some of these reds get shorter time in barrel and therefore are perfectly enjoyable just on their own, but those with longer maturation in oak will complement tuna steak, lamb or games very well.

Liatiko

This blue grape variety produces very light and fruity reds, therefore it's mostly used as a



Lunch is served!

Med Kitchen at Sister Cities Festival

CHICAGO — The Chicago Sister Cities International Festival takes place Monday through Friday, August 6–10, 2012 from 10:30 am–5:30 pm in Daley Plaza. Highlights of the festival include food from including Med Kitchen, which is representing Greece.

Med Kitchen is a modern Mediterranean eatery from the Greek family behind HUB'S Restaurant (hubsrestaurant.com), of Saturday Night Live fame ("You like-a da juice, ah?"), located in Lincoln Square since 1976.

Continued on next page

National Hellenic Museum 5th Annual Kouzina Event

Guests will “Taste the Food, Taste the Wine, and Taste the Culture”

CHICAGO—National Hellenic Museum (NHM) announces their 5th Annual Kouzina Event to be held from 6 to 9 pm on Thursday, September 20, 2012 at the Museum, located on 333 South Halsted, in the heart of historic Greektown. The Museum invites guests, from all over the Chicago metropolitan area to come “Taste the food - Taste the wine - Taste the culture.” Guests will experience an authentic Greek event when they:

Taste the food – prepared by top chefs from around the country who will whip up delectable Greek and Mediterranean bites.

Taste the wine – and enjoy premium wine tastings from Greece.

Taste the culture – sample and shop at the pop-up “Agora” (The MarketPlace) featuring authentic Greek foods and products.



Experience the culture – with a special Kouzina exhibit: Exploring Greek History and Tradition through Food and Wine.

Mia Figlia Chef John Boudavas will serve as Kouzina Chef Committee Chair. According to Chef John Boudavas, “It is an honor to help sup-

port the Museum and the work it does to preserve the Greek American story. Events like Kouzina, gives us an opportunity to convey our story and our culture through our food and wine.”

Boudavas is joined by participating Chefs George Alpogiannis from City Porch and Jimmy Bannos, Sr. from Heaven on Seven.

Tickets for Kouzina are \$100 per person and \$125 at the door. Community and corporate sponsorship opportunities are still available. For more information or to buy tickets visit [NHM website/Kouzina](http://NHMwebsite/Kouzina).

For more information, visit www.nationalhellenicmuseum.org or call 312-655-1234.

blending partner. There’s only one dry red wine made predominantly from Liatiko that I recommend, the rest are dessert wines.

Domaine Economou’s Oikonomou is 80% Liatiko and 20% Mandilari. It receives a minimum of five years barrel and bottle maturation before it is released on the market. It’s very light ruby and garnet in colour with vibrant aromatics in the nose, an excellent complexity, fine concentration and refined tannins surround the dried strawberries, geranium and earthy tones. It’s a bit more expensive, but so worth it. If you like matured Burgundies, you will surely enjoy this.

Mostly garnet and olive with an orange tinge on the rim, these dessert wines are abundant in aromas of raisin, dried apricots, roasted almonds, figs and olives. Serve them with cheese, pies or other cakes made with walnuts and almonds. Recommendations: Silva Daskalaki–Liatiko 2007, Efronesi–Aurero 2007 and Idaia–Liatiko 2008.

Romeiko

The most traditional Cretan variety, produced in a very oxidized style, smells like sherry. It’s produced by almost all Cretan villagers for home consumption. Such a style is a hard sell—if not impossible—on the international market. However, the Dourakis Family, just off Chania, convinced me that it only takes a talented winemaker

to craft some fantastic wine from Romeiko.

The 1997 vintage Dourakis Romeiko, with its high alcohol content and notes of petrol—as if you were tasting an aged Riesling from the Mosel—is followed by a complex mix of almond, roasted peanuts, orange peel and raisins. This level of complexity would not be possible without the two years of barrel aging this wine receives. Whilst it deserves high marks, we must convince the Dourakis Family to start producing it again, as they have not made it since the 1997 vintage. Their interpretation of this traditional wine is such that fine dining restaurants would fight for it.

Compass: Beliefs and Styles

It’s difficult to outline the differences in terroir between wines produced in the Heraklion or Chania appellations of Crete. Rather, it’s much more important to map the various beliefs and philosophies, as they shape the styles to a greater extent.

Among the largest wineries we must mention Alexakis, Minos and Lyrarakis. All are family owned ventures with an annual production of around 800,000 bottles. Minos and Lyrarakis take their fair share from tourism and hospitality too, with larger groups flocking to the tasting rooms of Minos and smaller ones visiting Lyrarakis. These wineries played an important role

in making Cretan varieties better known in the export markets too.

Request Cretan wines at your local merchant, because there is so much to discover. The same variety may have a number of different faces reflecting the philosophies of the growers. For example, Thrapsathiri will be zesty and reductive if made by Idaia, but Efronesi will keep it three months in-barrel after fermentation finished in stainless steel and this builds more body, whilst Lyrarakis will ferment and mature it in barrel, which leads to a full-bodied, yet fresh white wine. Cheers and enjoy your glass of Cretan wine!

Editor’s note: Peter Csizmadia-Honigh is a Hungarian transplant living and working in London, UK. His day-time job keeps him busy with the management of a global wine education program, whilst he dedicates his free time to wine writing and winegrowing. Peter regularly writes for VinCE, the largest wine magazine in Hungary, and Sommelier India. As co-proprietor of Royal Somló Vineyards in Western Hungary, he crafts wines for Michelin-star restaurants in London, Amsterdam and Budapest, from Juhfark, an indigenous Hungarian variety.