

## Caroline Gilby MW uncovers Cyprus's burgeoning wine industry

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**Sun, sea and sand are not factors normally associated with quality wine production, but once you leave the high-rise hotels and holiday villas, inland Cyprus is a fascinating ancient wine landscape, discovers Caroline Gilby MW.**

**At the same time, it is still a very young wine industry in its current guise. In the five years since my last in-depth wine visit to Cyprus, things are often for the better. Wine quality and drinkability have improved and wine has taken the place of whisky and beer on restaurant tables. There is a slightly surprised optimism among some producers who are thriving in spite of the economic climate.**

Eastern Europe is normally my "patch", but recent wine history in Cyprus has a lot in common with the former communist bloc. It has moved from a heavily subsidised, volume product (and big shipments to Soviet Union too) towards individual estates focussed on quality over quantity - in part due to EU membership in 2004. There are now more than 50 registered producers, though only 10 to 15 are really producing wine commercially. Of these, the new ones are the shadows of their former selves: Keo admits crushing just 3,000 tonnes compared to 30,000 tonnes a decade ago, while ETKO (famous for Errasmos) now handles just 580 tonnes.

Cyprus was hit hard by its banking crisis and IMF bailout a couple of years ago, but - perhaps surprisingly - its better producers are doing well in spite of it. Sophocles Vlassides says, "It's helped wineries like ours buy land as people needed to sell." Costas Tsiakkas adds, "The crisis means Cypriots are supporting local products, and people are choosing wisely how they spend their money." Imported wines still outnumber local ones in volume (9 million compared to an estimated 3.5 million litres of bottled Cyprus wine and another 3.5 million in bulk and bag-in-box), but imports have fallen recently a little and are crept up slightly for Cypriot wine. Better quality has to be a factor here too.



Vines in the Makkas estate, Cyprus

Cyprus winemakers are an incredibly well educated lot. Travelling abroad to study is the norm here, leading to an open-minded approach to improving wine, helping each other out with equipment, as well as shared marketing efforts. Sophocles Vlassides studied at UC Davis; Marcos Zambartas read chemistry and then winemaking in Australia; Minas Mina of Kyperounda went to Greece and Glasgow and is working on his doctorate; while Rebecca Agyrides has a marketing degree to taking on her late father's dreams. Costas Tsiakkas and Andreas Psaras at Makkas have both left investment banking to do wine, arguably less well paid, but a lot more popular.

Viticulture on Cyprus has a unique set of challenges and opportunities. Its isolation means there is no *Phylloxera*, so ancient vines with centuries-old varieties are still on the island, and some fascinating ancient varieties are re-emerging (such as the promising red Yiannoudi and white Promara and Morokanella). Some regard Maratheftiko as the island's potential flagship red, while others are getting fed up with its "diva" nature. The variety requires a constant battle and a chunk of the vineyard must be planted with a cross pollinator, and as Mina points out getting just 2 barrels from 0.8ha is not economically sustainable.

The torrid summer heat, reaching over 40°C in August, has meant producers have headed for the hills where altitude is a saviour. Cyprus has some vineyards in Europe at over 1,500m, and cooler temperatures so high up are vital for Xynisteri (or Xyn for short) in particular - the island's flagship red grape most important native white grape whose name translates as "low acid" but with good vinification and even judicious blending with higher acid varieties like Semillon, it gives appealing results. So far, there's hardly any research into this grape and how it suits hot dry Cyprus conditions so well, nor even selection. It ripens in late September and into October, unlike international grapes like Chardonnay, which have to be picked in late July - no summer for Cypriot winemakers. Of the international varieties Shiraz and Mourvedre seem most at home, but most agree that local Cyprus grape varieties are the way forward.

Cyprus has a lot of potential ambassadors in its 2.5 million visitors, but the usual issues of export costs and duties mean Cyprus wines will never be widely exported. However, listings are popping up in UK with Berry Bros (Zambartas' impressive Maratheftiko and vivid Lefkada-based Rosé and Kyperounda's sweet Commandaria) and Novum Wines (with Kyperounda's brilliant Petritis white, made from Xynisteri). However, there is still a huge opportunity to convert Cypriot residents and tourists to local produce. It seems young people are increasingly interested in wine, and wine bars are popping up in the same time, the best producers in Cyprus are delivering wines that are genuinely worth drinking.