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Commandaria - a new face for an ancient wine



Caroline Gilby MW reports that Cyprus's national treasure has received an elegant update in the hands of three ambitious winemakers, including Marcos Zambartas, pictured above.

I see a lot of parallels between the legendary Commandaria of Cyprus and Hungary's Tokaji Aszú. Both are sweet wines with long histories, both described as 'wine of kings and king of wines', at different times (Commandaria by Richard the Lionheart in 1192, Tokaji much later by Louis XIV) and enjoyed on royal tables across Europe. And both lost their way and their quality for a few decades of the 20th century, becoming dark, sticky,

oxidative wines, often fortified for stability, and aged for many years in old, sometimes dirty, oak. Tokaji has been seeing the light of a new quality era for around three decades and, finally, there are signs of a new dawn for Commandaria, too.

Costas Tsiakkas, founder and owner Tsiakkas winery, says it was an article in *Decanter* in 2004 about the new face of Tokaji that helped inspire him to go in a new direction with Commandaria. After retiring from his banking career 22 years ago, he joined the board of the co-operative bank in his village and wine was under the bank's jurisdiction.

'Commandaria is our tradition and I felt that the large wineries were not treating Commandaria the way it deserved', he says. He could see that things were not right – mouldy and unripe grapes dried on the ground because that's the cheapest way, old-fashioned machinery, no temperature control, no trained oenologists, and big tanks that took days to fill. 'I tried several times to change things, but no one was listening, so I decided to do my own wine.' To begin with, it was hard as growers didn't want to risk their contracts with the island's big four wineries, but he persuaded the reluctant co-operative to rent him some space, and he bought a mobile cooling unit and two steel tanks. He made an agreement with a grower (he still works with the same grower) to buy all the grapes from two vineyards and he began to experiment. Traditionally, Commandaria is made from two local grapes – the red Mavro and white Xynisteri, dried in the sun for 7-10 days, but Tsiakkas has opted for a pure Xynisteri for its finer fruit quality and higher acidity.

Commandaria is a protected designation of origin (PDO) wine produced in just 14 specified villages on the southern slopes of the Troodos mountains (see this [map](#)) from the local dark-skinned Mavro and/or white Xynisteri. These same villages were designated as early as the 13th century under the reign of the Lusignans so it may be the oldest 'designation of origin' wine in the world. It also got its current name around that time from the headquarters or Grande Commanderie of the Knights Templar and Knights of St John – though the wine's history is much longer, as evidenced by the mention of a dried-grape wine called Cyprus Nama (or manna) by the poet Hesiod in 800 BCE. It also holds the Guinness World Record for the oldest named wine in continuous production. With the arrival of Christianity in Byzantine times, it became associated with communion – an association it's still sometimes stuck with today, not helped by the rather religious imagery of traditional Commandaria bottles.

The wines are typically fortified, though it's not quite clear when fortification became normal practice. Some say it began 50 to 60 years ago for stability during long oxidative barrel ageing, while others claim it came in the 1800s with the British and their love of

port. But importantly for Tsiakkas, the PDO rules state only that the wine 'may be fortified'. He stopped fortifying in 2008 for a more elegant wine, and two other producers, Kyperounda and Zambartas, also do not fortify.

The PDO rules do insist on at least two years in oak barrels, though in the big companies, a solera-style, multi-year blend is typical. (These are becoming fewer, as two of the island's four former big companies are in bankruptcy measures or have given up wine production.) Arguably, quality is also undermined by the regulations permitting added sugar and non-grape spirit. Tsiakkas has applied for clay jars to be permitted in the PDO rules, as he believes it would be a more traditional option than oak, which did not arrive in Cyprus until the 1800s.

Commandaria must be grown and vinified in the region, and producers say the fermentation usually stops by itself at sugar levels of 140–200 g/l, though they may intervene to chill it if alcohol levels look too high (13–14% is the aim for the unfortified versions). Once the young wine has passed a tasting test, it may be moved for ageing. When he first started producing Commandaria, Tsiakkas says he had trouble with tasters not accepting his wine as typical (another parallel with early modern Tokaji), but finds his wines now score well. Tsiakkas' winery is at around 1,000 m (3,280 ft) elevation and the cellar is at a steady 16 °C (61 °F), which he feels is better for fresher flavours. Avoiding oxidation is also important so he uses third-fill barrels, previously used for white wines, kept topped up. He's changed his mind about long oak ageing and is reducing the time in barrel from 5 to 3 years, explaining, 'We like this fresher style.'

Marcos Zambartas at Zambartas Wineries has just released his first-ever Commandaria, a 2011 called Melusine, a tribute to his late father, Akis, who was a key figure in reinventing Cyprus winemaking. Zambartas was the first to dry his grapes on tables with chicken-wire netting to allow maximum air circulation, but he also uses shade netting (pictured below) since literature indicates that slower drying produces more aromas. 'It takes longer but the grapes are fresher', he says. In order to monitor the maturation of the grapes and the subsequent drying process more closely, he had to find vineyards and a field to place the drying beds near to the winery, but still within the Commandaria PDO zone to adhere to the regulations. In 2017 he switched to sourcing grapes from Silikou village, just 25 minutes from his winery, instead of Zoopigi village, which is 50 minutes away. He is fanatical about checking weather forecasts so he can protect the grapes from rain – botrytis is not part of the Commandaria style.

He ferments in a community facility in the region with his own small tanks, hoses and pumps. He says, 'it looks like we are getting ready for battle' when they set off to make the wine - complete with a backgammon set to play during the long, slow press cycle. Zambartas uses both Mavro and Xynisteri. 'I don't support single-varietal Commandaria; it's a fallacy. The two grapes are very complementary.' He adds that the exact blend will vary every year and, after the first year which was at least 95% Xynisteri, the share of Mavro has gone up to 30-60%. 'Our aim is not to produce exactly the same product every vintage, but the style of the wine will remain constant, ie ten-year maturation giving evolved characters, balanced acidity/sweetness, natural alcohol.' Ageing is done back at his winery in Agios Amvrosios in his own used barrels, and he's found that 300- to 400-litre sizes give better results than barriques, which he finds too aggressive.

Minas Mina (pictured above) at Kyperounda also makes a notable new-style Commandaria, explaining that, 'We started to make Commandaria because we believe it is a part of our long viticultural history, although commercially it has very limited interest. It's something that we have to keep active.' He supervises winemaking under contract in the region and has worked with the same winery since 2005 - he likes that they grow 100% Xynisteri (a grape he has studied intensively for his doctorate) and that they have a gentle hydraulic basket press. The young wines are moved to Kyperounda (one of the highest wineries in Europe at 1,140 m/3,740 ft) to age for at least six years in three-year-old French oak barriques previously used for Chardonnay and kept topped up to avoid oxidation.

Commandaria may be the national treasure of Cyprus, but production had shrunk to just a trickle of 126,061 litres (33,302 gal) in 2021 on an area of 423.5 ha (1,046 acres), compared with 800,000 litres (211,338 gal) back in 2006. Like all sweet wines, the challenge is getting consumers to buy and drink it. Mina reckons he sells 50% of his production in duty-free at the airport and that Cypriots don't drink it. Zambartas is more positive, seeing Commandaria as a standard-bearer on the world stage and that Cypriots are proud of it and will buy it for gifts. He is also finding customers among locals that like Commandaria and want to try a good one, and among tourists coming to the winery. Tsiakkas says that there are signs of Cypriots slowly regaining a sense of pride in local products, but he also notes, 'Cypriots think they don't like Commandaria, so it's all about tasting.' His wine is twice the price of standard Commandaria, but he successfully sells half of his production direct from the winery.

These few modern, unfortified, more elegant and refined Commandarias are a new and delicious face for a very ancient wine. You may have to go on holiday to Aphrodite's island to find them, or at least look in duty-free on the way home. But don't miss one of the world's truly legendary wines.

The tasting notes below are in order by vintage, youngest to oldest.

Tsiakkas 2019 Commandaria

Pre-release sample tasted at the winery. Sun-dried Xynisteri grapes, aged in third-fill white wine barrels for three years.

Mid orange-amber and bright. Complex aromas of date, raisin, orange zest, dried mango and a touch of nutmeg. Generously sweet and silky to taste, with luscious sultana and candied-peel notes and well-balanced acidity. Best enjoyed on the younger side for the vivid freshness of fruit. (CG)

Drink

2023

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2030

17.5

Tsiakkas 2017 Commandaria

Sun-dried Xynisteri grapes (organically grown), aged in third-fill white-wine barrels for five years. RS 218 g/l.

A rich amber wine with glowing orange highlights. The bouquet is reminiscent of natural dried apricots and golden raisins with a hint of sticky toffee pudding and cinnamon. It's lusciously sweet, velvety and mouth-filling, with generous apricot, dried fig and date notes and a twist of orange zest. Acidity is moderate but nicely balanced for a long and surprisingly light finish. (CG)

14%

Drink

2023

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2033

£44 per 50 cl Amathus Drinks

17 +

Kyperounda 2013 Commandaria

Xynisteri, six years in used Chardonnay barrels, RS 149 g/l.

Complex deep-amber wine with a bouquet of dried fruit, figs, raisins, dates, and notes of bonfire toffee. To taste there's fantastic, layered depth, generous, rich liquid-raisin notes and gentle acidity that balances the sweetness, then a long finish. Rich but not heavy.

(CG)

14%

Drink

2023

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2030

£24.99 per 50 cl Aspris & Son

17

Zambartas, Melusine 2011 Commandaria

95% Xynisteri, 5% Mavro. 10 years in oak. pH 3.1, RS 206 g/l.

Mid tawny-brown with orange highlights. Inviting, rich Christmas-cake aromas and flavours with hints of raisin, coffee and treacle toffee, and super-clean, too. The palate is rich, intense and long, but not cloying at all thanks to great acidity. (CG)

13.5%

Drink

2023

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2033

17.5