

Into the Vinous Heart of Cyprus

The revival of the sweet, sun-dried Commandaria is powering the island-nation's wine renaissance, writes **Michèle Shah**

Photos: Michele Shah



Ninety-year-old Xinisteri vine at KEO, one of Cyprus's largest and most historic producers

With a winemaking heritage that stretches back over 5,000 years, Cyprus is the third-largest island in the Mediterranean. Its strategic position, where Europe, Asia and Africa converge, placed it at the heart of the ancient wine trade. From Homeric texts to Roman amphorae, the island's wines have long been celebrated.

Few wines embody this legacy more than Commandaria, a sweet, sun-dried wine named by the Knights Templar in the 12th century, still produced today using the indigenous grapes **Xynisteri** and **Mavro**. The Commandaria PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) is arguably the world's oldest named wine still in production — a symbol of Cyprus's enduring vinous identity.

But the story of Cypriot wine is one of both glory and interruption. Under Ottoman rule, winemaking diminished; the 20th century brought a shift to bulk production, stripping the island's wine of its artisanal roots.

It is only in recent decades that Cyprus has begun to reclaim its ancient pedigree. A new generation of producers — many working with old, bush-trained “gobelet vines” (where the vines are pruned into a goblet or bush shape) — is reviving native grape varieties and rediscovering forgotten mountain vineyards. The result is a renaissance that marries heritage with innovation.

Even the geography of Cyprus tells a story. Since 1974, the island has been divided between the Greek-Cypriot south and the Turkish-Cypriot north. Approximately 40%

of its terrain is mountainous, providing the high altitudes, limestone and volcanic soils, and diurnal temperature shifts that make quality viticulture possible — even under increasingly arid conditions.

Cyperus today boasts seven official wine routes that cut across this varied topography. The most storied is the Commandaria Route, which links 14 villages clustered around the southern slopes of the Troodos Mountains. Here, terraces from the Byzantine era still cradle old bush-trained vines, many over 80 years old, producing grapes that are dried on rooftops or open fields before pressing.

The Krasochoria of Limassol (literally, “Wine Villages”) form another vital axis of Cyprus's wine culture. These high-altitude hamlets are home to many of the island's boutique wineries, where native varieties are now championed over the international ones once used to attract export markets. The Pitsilia region, tucked deeper into the Troodos range, is cooler and more extreme — ideal for the revival of grapes such as



Old photos of harvest activity at Revecca Winery in Cyprus



Maratheftiko and **Giannoudi**.

Each route offers a different lens into Cypriot wine culture, from coastal terroirs near Laona-Akamas to the isolated slopes of Vouni Panagias. But it is in the Commandaria zone that the island's historical and vinous heart beats most strongly.

Commandaria: A Living Relic

Commandaria, produced exclusively in the 14 named villages of the PDO, is a wine like no other. Traditionally made by laying the grapes out in the sun to raisinate for 10 to 20 days, it undergoes slow fermentation and minimum two years of oak ageing. Most versions today are fortified, with neutral grape spirit added to halt fermentation and preserve residual sugar. But a handful of small producers are reviving the unfortified style, allowing the wine to ferment naturally to dryness or semi-sweetness — a nod to older methods that highlight terroir and elegance over sheer power.

Rebecca Winery, located in the village of Agios Mamas, champions a purist philosophy. Owner Nikolas Christodoulides cultivates

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old Xynisteri and Mavro vines (some more than 80 years old) without irrigation, ferments the sun-dried grapes in traditional clay “pitharia” and presses them using baskets. This meticulous method produces an unfortified Commandaria renowned for its finesse, depth and balanced flavour, where the alcohol never overshadows the nuanced profile. In particularly abundant harvests, grapes are even sun-dried on local football fields, a practical tradition that underscores their commitment to authenticity.

Bottling around 3,000 to 4,000 bottles under the Revecca label, the winery also vinifies Commandaria for other producers, quietly playing a vital role in preserving and elevating this historic Cypriot wine style. Though modest in scale, Revecca stands as a testament to how heritage, minimal intervention and careful craftsmanship can create wines of exceptional integrity.

A few kilometres away in the picturesque village of Doros, Karseras winery embodies a profound respect for tradition and terroir, following a similar ethos to other Commandaria producers in the region. Although officially founded in 1998 by Panayiotis Karseras, the estate’s viticultural roots run deep, with family records tracing back to the 11th century.

Today, the winery is led by Panayiotis’s son and grandson, with Filippas Karseras at the helm of winemaking. Spanning 15 hectares across six designated Commandaria villages, the estate cultivates the indigenous grape varieties Mavro (90%) and Xynisteri (10%), dedicated exclusively to producing Commandaria wines that express both heritage and purity.

Karseras wines are carefully vinified in stainless steel before aging in barrels, with the flagship Family Edition maturing for two years, and the prestigious Platinum label aged patiently for 20 years without

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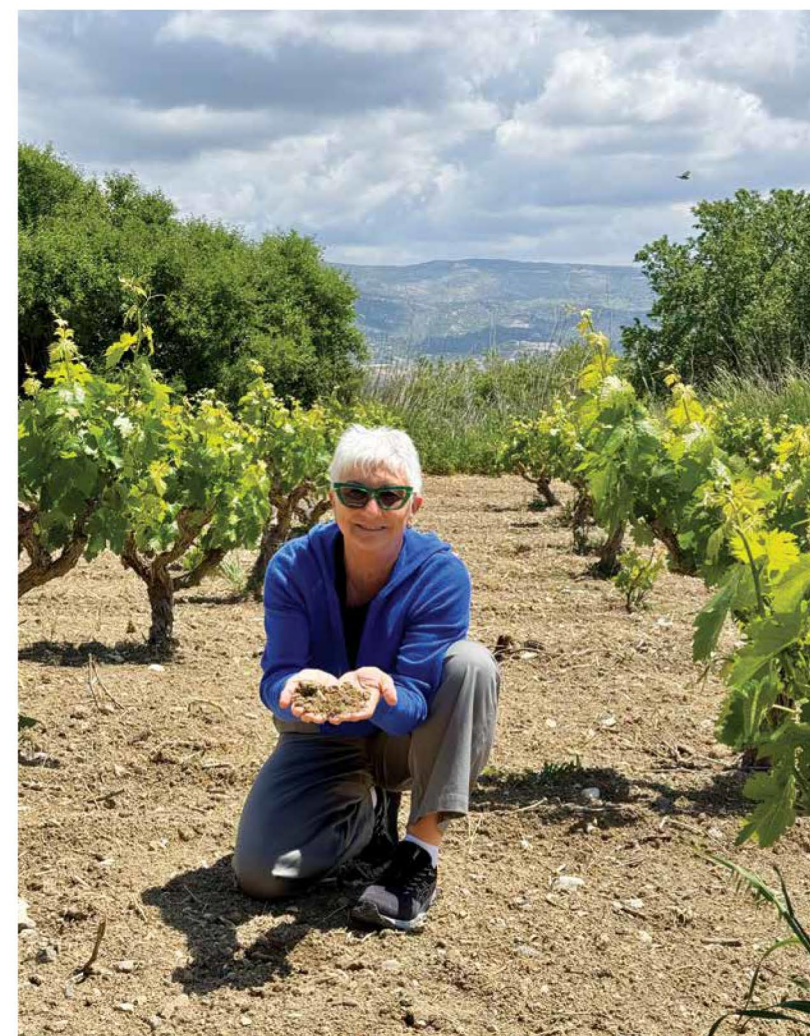
filtration. This exceptional patience allows the wine to develop a depth and complexity that mirrors the ancient olive trees and stone terraces surrounding the vineyards. The estate’s philosophy is rooted in minimal intervention, a deep connection to terroir, and a commitment to quality — values reflected in every bottle and symbolized by the venerable olive trees that stand as living witnesses to the Karseras family’s enduring winemaking legacy.

Yet Commandaria is not just an area; it is a cause. At LOEL Winery, Georgiou Thoukis, oenologist and vice president of the Culture, Education and Heritage Group of the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV), has become one of its most articulate advocates. LOEL, founded in 1943 as Cyprus’s first public-listed winery, produces both Commandaria and Zivania, a clear pomace brandy made from Xynisteri and Mavro. Thoukis sees these spirits and wines as national emblems and is leading efforts to have Commandaria inscribed as part of UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Resurgence of Native Varieties

Beyond Commandaria, the resurgence of native grape varieties is reshaping the island’s wine narrative. Xynisteri, a fresh, citrus-driven white, and Mavro, once maligned as rustic, are being re-evaluated. Other lesser-known reds, **Maratheftiko**, **Giannoudi** and **Lefkada**, are finding champions among winemakers who value structure, spice and individuality.

At KEO, one of Cyprus’s largest and most historic producers, the focus has turned to old vine Xynisteri from the Mallia estate. Some vines are over 90 years old, and their resilience to heat and drought makes them increasingly valuable. “These vines are survivors,” says Timos Boyias, head agronomist. “They yield less, but the concentration is incredible.” In 2024, yields were nearly halved due to



Above: Examining the soil at Ezousa Winery, which is perched above the river valley in Kannaviou. Below, bottles of Commandaria wine produced at KEO and Revecca wineries



Top: Amphorae at Karseras winery in Doros; right, stones collected from Tsangarides winery in Lemona

extreme heatwaves, prompting KEO to chill harvested grapes on arrival (sometimes at over 35°C) to preserve freshness.

Nowhere is the tension between tradition and renewal more tangible than in the mountain village of Farmakas, home to Santa Irene Winery. Founded in 2016 by Daniel Anastasis, a returning Cypriot émigré, the project began as a mission to rescue abandoned vineyards once tended by his grandfather. Many were on steep, hand-terraced plots more than 1,000 metres above sea level – the kind of terrain modern agriculture has little time for.

But Anastasis saw potential in the old Mavro vines, some of which are more than 100 years old. He calls these high-altitude plots “Vinea Ardua”, or the arduous vines. Farmed organically and with minimal intervention, they produce wines of rare tension and grace, preserving not just a grape but a way of life.

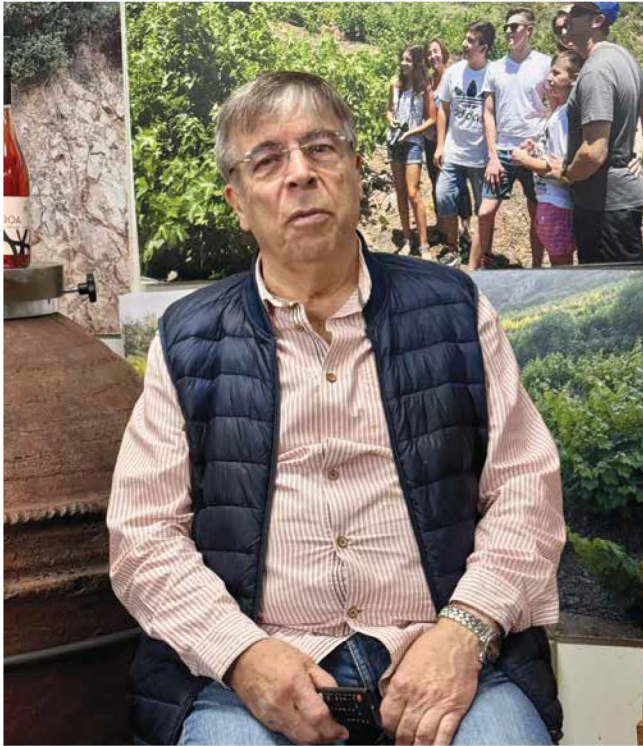
The same philosophy guides Angelos

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and Louiza Tsangarides, siblings who founded their organic winery in Lemona in 2004. With 26 hectares of estate vines and fruit from trusted growers, Tsangarides produces around 400,000 bottles a year. Native varieties are the focus: **Xynisteri**, **Maratheftiko** and **Vasilissa**, all grown without synthetic chemicals. The winery’s position, 300 to 500 metres above sea level in the foothills of the Troodos, provides the altitude and ventilation needed for organic farming to thrive.

Ezousa Winery, perched above the river valley in Kannaviou, takes a similarly terroir-driven approach. With 12 hectares of estate vines and another eight managed by local farmers, winemaker Michalis Constantinides is gradually moving away from international grapes in favour of local ones. His Giannoudi and Maratheftiko wines, in particular, offer a compelling glimpse of Cyprus’s future: structured yet fresh, deeply rooted in site, and unmistakably Mediterranean.

Below, left: Georgiou Thoukis, oenologist and vice president of OIV and, right, Daniel Anastasis, founder of Santa Irene Winery



Ancient Mavro vines at Santa Irene Winery vineyards, some of which are more than 100 years old

Conclusion: Memory in the Glass

The story of Cypriot wine is not just about grapes and geography; it is about remembering, reimagining and returning. It is about the way vines cling to terraces cut by ancestors, how amphorae are unearthed beside new steel tanks, and how old vines are coaxed back to life by hands shaped by heritage.

Thanks to the Ministry of Tourism and the Circle of Wine Writers, our journey into Cyprus’s vinous revival revealed a country not merely making wine, but reclaiming an identity. In every glass – whether a racy Xynisteri from the coast, a juicy Maratheftiko from the mountains, or a honeyed Commandaria aged for decades – there is a taste of continuity, of resistance, of hope. And in a world increasingly dominated by uniformity, that is a flavour worth rediscovering. ♦

CYPRriot wine grapes

White Varieties

- Xynisteri:** The primary white grape on the island, fresh and aromatic.
- Moshato:** Aromatic Muscat family grapes, used in various sweet and dry wines.
- Thrapsathiri:** A minor variety, sometimes blended.
- Promara:** Once nearly forgotten, it’s being brought back for its crisp acidity and delicate aromas.
- Lefkada:** A rare white grape found in limited areas, with potential for aromatic wines.

Red Varieties

- Mavro:** The main red grape, essential to Commandaria.
- Maratheftiko:** Increasingly important for quality red wines.
- Vasilissa:** A very rare indigenous red variety, known for deep colour and structure.
- Kountourka:** Another rare local red grape.
- Xynisteri Roditis:** A red mutation of Xynisteri, uncommon.
- Spourtiko:** A very rare red grape being explored for its unique character.