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Cretan wines are the stuff of legend – and these are the bottles you should buy



A family's quest to rescue the island's native grape varieties has led them to the nectar of the gods

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Daphne was the dazzlingly beautiful nymph of Greek mythology who was turned into a laurel tree when she begged to be saved from Apollo's advances. Daphne, or dafni, means laurel. It is also the name of an extremely rare white grape, native to the island of Crete, that is so-called because it makes wine that has a distinctive whiff of bay.

According to Bart Lyrarakis of Domaine Lyrarakis, wine made from dafni was likely to have been drunk by the Minoans. "A copper vessel dating back to the late Minoan period was found in the Cave of Ilithias [goddess of childbirth and fertility]. It's inscribed - in ancient Linear A writing - with the words dafnitis oinos - laurel wine."

He continues: "Crete has been making wine for an extremely long time and is one of the few places in the world that has done so without stopping at all."

Lyrarakis, a family domaine, was set up by Bart's father and uncle in 1966. Bart was originally a computer engineer, "But I started helping my father. He said, 'Don't come, don't come,' I said, 'Too late, you're stuck with me now,'" and he has taken on the family mission of not just making wine but focusing on, and rescuing, native varieties.

Crete is the second-largest wine producing area in Greece and has "11 recognised indigenous varieties," he says. "But we believe there are many more, it just takes some time to prove to the authorities that they merit including in the list."

One unexpected but pleasing thing about the Lyrarakis (pronounced Li-ra-REYE-kiss) wines is how well received they have been. I don't mean that unkindly - these are wines I actively choose to pour into my glass. Just that wines made on a Greek island with no modern reputation for wine, from grapes whose names had even a roomful of wine experts saying, "Sorry - how do you spell that?" don't look like an easy sell.

This isn't just a metropolitan thing. "Lyrarakis wines have been hugely successful outside London despite being unusual grape varieties," says Lenka Sedláčková of importer Fields, Morris & Verdin. "We sell them to a lot of smaller wine merchants who say they do very well. It's the quality."

So true. I am not the biggest fan of novelty for novelty's sake: spare me the struggle of trying to enjoy a white syrah made in Kathmandu, or a wine made from French variety that is extremely rare mainly because it tastes so awful. But, to put it simply, these unusual Cretan wines are very good to drink.

The whites in particular are bone dry, have refreshing acid and share a herbal, savoury personality. "They have to be to go with our food," says Bart. "The cuisine of Crete is salty, it has no sweetness at all to it, it usually has herbs or tomatoes and we're drinking the wine in a warm environment." So perfect for summer.

As the perspicacious wine critic Margaret Rand points out, another reason for Lyrarakis's current success is that in both food and wine the representation of local ingredients and culture have become more fashionable than bland internationalism.

The Lyrarakis family has some of its own vineyards and also works with more than 100 grape farmers around Crete, which allows them to concentrate on finding the right vines in the right place. It is credited with saving the dafni grape from near-extinction. "The grape has a thick skin and always ripens very late, which means the farmers growing it are always exposed to the risk of rain [before or at harvest]," says Bart, explaining why dafni fell out of favour.

The Lyrarakis dafni (£13.25, Berry Bros & Rudd) is grown about nine miles from Knossos. The wines really do seem bay-scented, they have a thickish feel, and also taste of lemon balm, citrus and galangal. It's one to have with dinner: it would be great with fish cooked en papillote with fennel, bay or dill, or with Greek lemon potatoes.

Plyto is another white grape that the family has saved from oblivion: this one is prone to disease, so presented another bad risk for farmers. I particularly liked the Domaine Lyrarakis Plyto 2018 (£13.75, Berry Bros & Rudd): it's more delicate and feels finer in the mouth than the dafni: think in aromatic terms of lemon peel, white grapefruit, white flowers and of the astringency and herbaceous qualities of dandelion and just a tiny whiff of aniseed, with a clover nectar and a faint eggshell sheen.



The Lyrarakis vine museum

I also love the intensely refreshing sensation of clear blades and spikes of fresh lemon in the Domaine Lyrarakis Voila Assyrtiko 2018 (Majestic, Berry Bros & Rudd, various independents, £9.99-£12.95). Assyrtiko is grown in Santorini and elsewhere, and is neither endangered nor native to Crete, but it is delicious – the Crete incarnation of the grape is smoother, cleaner and lighter than those from Santorini.

These are my three favourites of the Lyrarakis portfolio. You'll find more at Berry Bros & Rudd (the red kotsifali is worth checking out) and at independents around the country. I expect there will soon be more, as Bart says he is working on other grape varieties – but winning administrative recognition of their existence is a long and slow task.