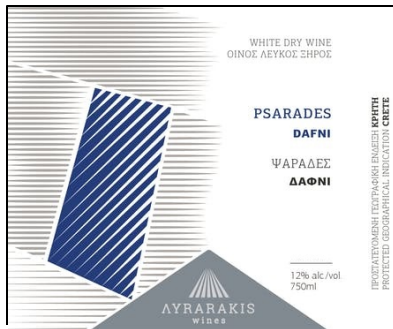


# Lyrarakis Crete



*Lyrarakis is widely acclaimed to have spearheaded the modern Cretan wine industry, garnering gongs from Jancis Robinson, Robert Parker (but don't let that put you off), Decanter and sundry other arbiters of taste in the wine world.*

—Kate Hawkings, The Buyer, November 2019

*A family-owned winery on Crete with a passion for indigenous varieties and nuanced winemaking*

—Julia Harding MW, July 2020

After Sicily and Sardinia, Crete is the largest of the Mediterranean's innumerable islands. Rising out of the sea north of Egypt and south of mainland Greece, it has four mountain ranges and correspondingly distinct geological structures—UNESCO has designated two sites of geological significance—dominated by limestone. As befits the birthplace of Zeus, the island has a scorching sun and an endless wind. During the Bronze Age, it hosted the Minoan Civilization, noted for its city-states, architecture and administration, to say nothing of far-flung trade. For as long as wine has been made, it has been made here (even during occupations by tee-totaling Ottomans and Moors). Only in 1913 did Crete become part of Greece.

One may think of Crete in relation to Greece as one thinks of Sicily in relation to Italy; its island identity and historic influences are at least as important as its nationality.

In 1966 Bart Lyrarakis' father and uncle founded their winery. Their timing wasn't exactly fortuitous, given that in the next decade phylloxera finally found its way to the island. This necessitated wide-spread replanting, with many growers favoring French over local varieties, and ushered in a period of dominance by cooperatives. Lyrarakis (*lear-a-rack-kies*) itself didn't begin to estate bottle its wine until 1992.

Bart, whose mother is Dutch, was a cellar rat as a kid, then worked in high-tech in Holland for a time before officially joining the winery in 2003, a year before Myriam Ambuzer. The daughter of a Palestinian and Cretan, Myriam worked with well-known Spanish winemaker Pepe Mendoza before becoming Lyrarakis' winemaker. She's smart, sure-footed, immensely intuitive, and her influence, along with a workforce that is just about half women, has inspired Lyrarakis to use Minoan images of queens on two of its labels. (Note also that the Lyrarakis labels use the Greek lambda, which looks like an A without the crossbar, for the English 'L' in 'Lyrarakis'.) The third leg of this stool is Nikos Somarakis, their far-sighted viticulturalist and ampelographer, who joined in 2007. Nikos is as intuitive and empathic as Myriam, and they are the spiritual duo to restless Bart, who holds the workforce and its many growers together. They work with each other in complete trust.

After working together for many years, these colleagues solidified their direction in 2016. Early on, the French varietals had their attention as much as Cretan grapes, although even then they were keen to preserve their local roots. In the years leading up to 2016, they began to focus almost entirely on vines native to Crete—and subsequently, taking it one step further, on sites best adapted to specific local varietals. Today, they have parcels all over the island, some growing at 200 meters and others as high as 950 meters. They expanded their network of growers and now buy grapes from over 100 independent small growers. They went organic in their own 37 acres of vineyards, and Nikos is leading the charge to convert their growers to do the same, with training programs and physical assistance. They revamped their labels.

The heart and soul of what Lyrarakis is doing is based on a series of vineyards, bottled in what they call their "single area" line of wines. These range from Kedros in the central western heights to the high-altitude Vóila Plain in the far east. There are currently eleven of these special sites, each labeled by the name of the grape followed by the name of the site, and each site is outlined on its label by colored topography.

Lyrarakis has rescued three varietals from obscurity and almost certain extinction from phylloxera: Dafni (DNA traces of which have been found in Minoan wine vessels), Plytó, and Melissaki. No one else on the island is currently making wine from these grapes.

The Lyrarakis winery looks at their Psarades vineyard, growing in limestone soils at 480 meters, with the Lassithi Mountains in the distance. Just beyond the Psarades Vineyard is where the winery composts its grape pomace and stems. These piles are turned regularly to aerate, and once the composting is complete and pathogens are naturally eliminated by heat and aeration, the compost is mixed with some soil and put on a porous platform. Worms are introduced, and these creatures digest and expel daily what they intake, creating an immensely rich nutrient base. A drip system is turned on at regular intervals to let water sieve through the mix, creating a tea from the compost that is collected under the platform. The tea can be recirculated through the compost as often as necessary for a desired strength, and the compost itself can be altered to make for higher levels of nitrogen or potassium, for example, if a given vineyard site is deficient in one or the other mineral. This tea is then applied to the site.

Lyrarakis is expanding this program not only for its growers and their vines, but for their olive orchards as well.

In the cellar, the touch is light, and tailored to each varietal and site; Myriam de-stems grapes, or uses whole berry, or whole cluster, or combinations thereof. Her white wines finish with refreshingly low octanes, and they're as much about texture and salinity as about overt fruit. They don't typically undergo malo because the malic acid is low, and they make fabulous seafood wines. As for those wonderful descriptions on the labels, Myriam writes them.

Most of the vineyard parcels they work with are non-irrigated and are hand-harvested. Many are head-pruned, especially those in windy sites where trellised systems can be risky (such zones often sport columns of modern wind turbines, each with a sensor that shuts them down when the wind exceeds safe speeds). In addition, often these parcels are inter-planted, as tradition mandated. These are old vines, and old vines on Crete means own-rooted pre-phylloxera vines planted at random in small--often very small--parcels that have supported vines for centuries.

Summers are hot; winters cold, especially at high altitudes, where snow is common.

There are around 60 independent producers on the island of various sizes—some quite small—and Crete accounts for roughly 20% of Greece's total wine production.