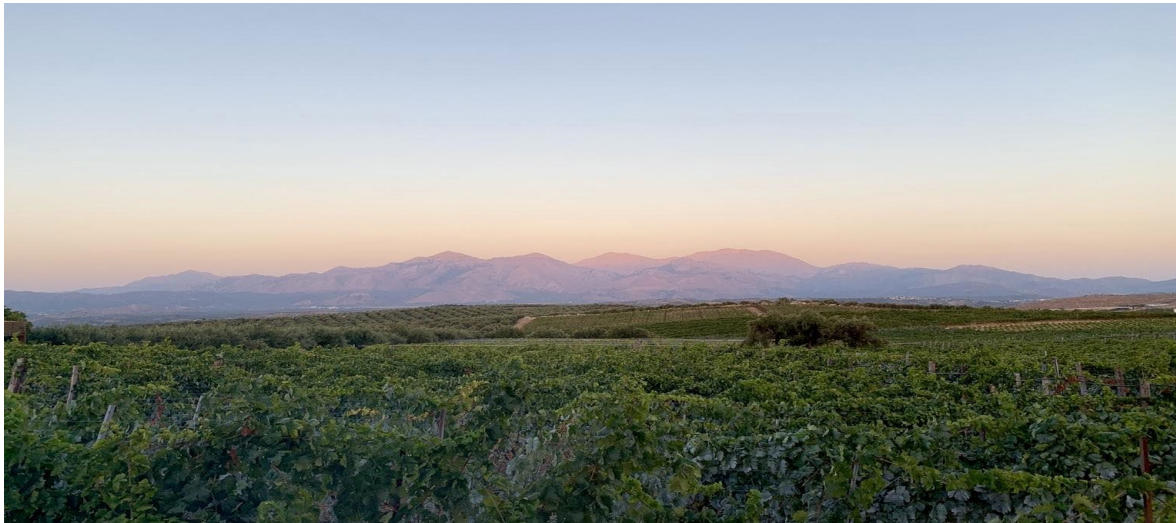


Crete Visit 2022

The Island:

Crete is a rugged and immensely beautiful island. It's home to dramatic mountain landscapes, cliffs that plunge into the turquoise sea, and wind-swept, arid hills dotted with hundreds of gnarled old olive trees. In these trees, the cicadas sing. At first their song is deafening but it quickly becomes a nostalgic soundtrack that follows you everywhere you go on the island.



The Family:



Pictured above from left to right: George, Mr. Lyrarakis, Mrs. Lyrarakis, Lambros, Bart

The Lyrarakis family are wonderful people and exceptional hosts. It was such a treat to get to spend so much time with them and to see how passionate they are about their family business and, more importantly, their family. Bart Lyrarakis is a charismatic force of nature who leads the project. We also spent time with his brothers Lambros and Georgio and briefly met their parents. Clearly they are all very close and it was heartwarming to see such a tight-knit family spanning multiple generations (all three sons have their own children now too).

In the Vineyards + Winery:

Our first day in the vineyards, we were picked up by Bart Lyrarakis and his brother Lambros and we drove out to the small mountain town of Meronas, in the western part of the island. After leaving wines to chill at the taverna where we would later have lunch, we headed to the Kedros vineyard. There were three things that impressed me most about this first vineyard visit:

- 1) The steep terraced vineyards – it was hard to capture the steepness in photos but with the top at 850 meters, you can imagine!
- 2) The low, gnarled bush vines of Liatiko that barely grow past your knee in height – harvesting here is back-breaking work.
- 3) The man farming these vineyards Mr. Georgios Linoksilakis (pictured below) is 85 years old! While we were all huffing and puffing to get up to the top of the vineyard, he was gracefully dancing around the gnarled vines tromping up the hill with ease, like the mountain goats we saw along the trail. It was impressive to say the least. He has farmed every vintage of this vineyard since he was 11 years old -- you do the math!



Mr. Georgios Linoksilakis is one of over 140 farmers that Bart Lyrarakis coordinates with on the island, many of which are around his age farming tiny plots of 100+ year old bush vines. Obviously it's a lot to manage and often during our hours in the car Bart was on the phone, calling farmers and vineyard hands. I can't say what they spoke about exactly (hey it's all Greek to me!) but I know in one instance Bart spoke with the farmer of a neighboring vineyard to negotiate a contract for his grapes in hopes of converting the vineyard to organic farming in the future, and on another call he was looking for folks to help harvest the muscat that was ready to pick the following day. It was striking to see how much work it is to coordinate with so many farmers. Bart mentioned one of the main pressures Lyrarakis faces is not knowing exactly what will happen to these old-vine vineyards when the 80+ year old farmers eventually retire, as most of the younger generation has moved into the cities and seems unlikely to take on the farming.

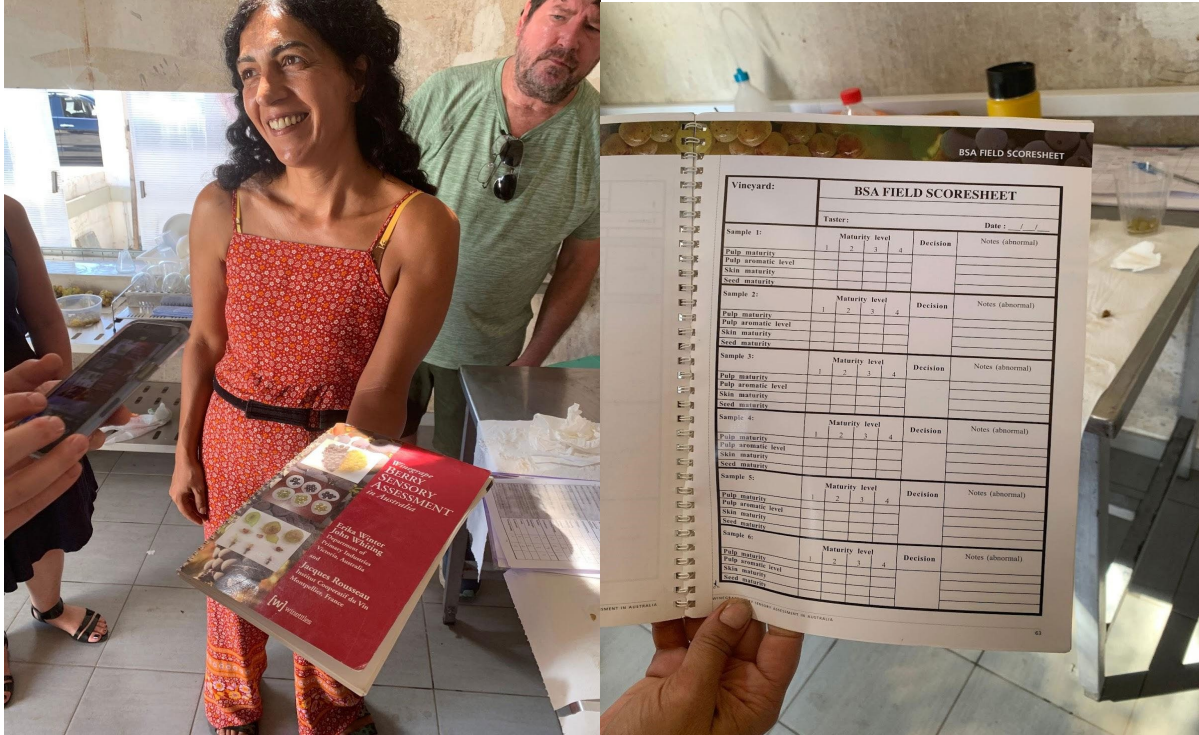
The Voila vineyards, where the Lyrarakis Assyrtiko is grown on the eastern side of the island, are marked by the ruins of a Venetian castle on the Voila plain dating back to the 1740's. Notice the very sandy soils in the first photo below...



Of course, we also visited the Lyrarakis winery and estate vineyard, Psarades, which is located just about in the middle of the island, about a 25-minute drive from Heraklion.



It's here that we met Lyrarakis' winemaker Miriam Ambuzer. Miriam is a total inspiration and a new hero of mine. Her methodical yet soulful approach to winemaking was fascinating. She took us through their "Berry Sensory" method of analyzing the grapes to determine the winemaking process for the type of wine they would like to make based on that vintage. Stem inclusion? More skin contact? Everything varies year to year and nothing is a given, thus making a wine reflective not only of place, but of a moment in time.



Another highlight was spending time with Nikos Somarakis, the Lyrarakis' viticulturist who is deeply committed to organic farming. Nikos is one of those people whose joyful spirit lights up a room and his peaceful energy is contagious – as it turns out, he's also a Reiki Master – it's no wonder he can coax magic out of the vines!



The team harvesting Muscat, the first to be harvested.

Most of you have probably read on our website about Bart Lyrarakis's compost system and the worms, and I was delighted to catch his explanation of it on camera during our visit.

Click the link to view (it's hard to hear Bart over the cicadas in the background, not to mention the constant wind which is essential to organic farming in this area):

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-pIGGrpwHtsJaabLmSMKl ug4u2rySKc/view?usp=sharing>

The Food + The Wines:

The cuisine on Crete is the stuff that Mediterranean dreams are made of. Think delectable Mediterranean seafood, grilled octopus, fish ceviche, fried calamari, grilled mushrooms, baked eggplant with tomato and feta, lightly fried zucchini croquettes, huge greek salads with tomatoes, cucumbers, olives and feta and lots and lots of olive oil. The feta on the island was the best I've ever had – so fresh and somehow extremely creamy (someone please tell me why all the feta in the US is so dry in comparison?). The yogurt and honey are also exceptional. Clearly this is a place where ingredients matter and they are impossibly fresh, often sourced from a neighboring garden, or the sea. The food is simple but exquisite, and it pairs beautifully with the Lyrarakis wines.

We mostly drank Lyrarakis wines during our visit and we didn't try many other wines from Crete in general. That said, of the other Cretan wines we tried, the Lyrarakis were in a league of their own. The elegance, finesse and complexity the Lyrarakis wines have is unparalleled, in my opinion.

At one point, I asked Bart what his favorite wines are (excluding his own) and he said German Rieslings – and suddenly it all clicked for me when I thought about the Lyrarakis whites. We were lucky enough to taste a couple of older vintages of the wines and the wine that stood out for me on this trip was a 2016 Psarades Dafni. It was gorgeous. The acid was still holding strong and it was textural on the palate without being heavy, it had this nuanced floral, honeyed note along with its herbal aromatics that were stunning. It was lifted and elegant and just delicious. These are wines that can age a bit – especially the whites.



One Final Memory to Share:

At the taverna where we had lunch in Meronas after our visit to the Kedros vineyard, there were local musicians participating in an artists' workshop in the town and they started playing traditional Cretan music (sitting at the table in the foreground you'll see Nikos join in too!).

Click link below to view:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ae7KO858RNjJ8hX4qggKaOMgABYjW-tT/view?usp=sharing>