



ON A MISSION TO SAVE MAVRO

• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Cyprus is a lovely place to visit. It is a country with beautiful beaches, expansive resort hotels, great restaurants, plenty of good hiking opportunities, even casinos. And Cypriots are, as a people, relaxed, friendly, and always ready with a warm welcome and a smile.

The majority of tourists visiting Cyprus are from Great Britain. There is a historical reason for its popularity with the Brits. It was once a British colony.

Second on the list of tourists are Israelis, probably because of the close proximity. It is quicker to fly to Larnaca than to Eilat.

Let me say on behalf of all Israelis, we hope we arrive politely and leave a good impression. We have not always traveled with our manners, but let's hope we are learning and that our image as tourists is improving.

For me, who sees everything through wine-tinted glasses, Cyprus means something else. There are high mountains, dreamy views, old vine vineyards, indigenous varieties, and many wineries that are dedicated to turning the fruit of their vines into the best wine possible. Cypriot wine is not yet well known enough, so it is a very interesting place to explore. It is a perfect venue for wine tourism.

These qualities were certainly apparent on my recent visit to Saint Irene Winery when I traveled as part of an official group with The Circle of Wine Writers thanks to the Deputy Ministry of Tourism.

To arrive at the winery, we had to drive slowly in wavy zigzags, steadily climbing, enjoying breathtaking scenery, overlooking steep drops, with the ground alternately covered with limestone stones or volcanic rocks.

There were vines everywhere, most grown in the bush, goblet style. They were often in terraced mosaics of small lot, family-sized vineyards, all in different aspects, each spouting gnarled old vines, with wild, flailing branches, like waving arms on a sinking ship.

We ascended higher than 1,000 meters above sea level until we arrived at a small village of 500 inhabitants called Farmakas, which is in the Pitsilia region, part of the Nicosia district.

The wine grape of the area has always been Mavro

Ampelisimo, to give its full name. *Mavro* means "black" in Greek. This is the most widely planted variety in Cyprus and is the workhorse grape of the island. It was first mentioned in 1877 but has been around for thousands of years. It is one of the varieties used to produce Commandaria, the wine with a longer history than any.

What is not in Mavro's favor is that it produces large grapes, is thin-skinned with a poor color, and wines produced from it can be light in taste.

What is in its favor is that it's versatile, with good yields, and is tasty as a table grape.

There are many Mavro vineyards all over Cyprus, but the percentage goes down every year as vineyards are abandoned or grubbed up.

The main activity of the farmers of Farmakas is growing grapes. They continue as their forefathers did before them. There is, however, a crisis in agriculture. Not only are the farmers and growers getting older, but, sadly and perhaps inevitably, the next generation prefers to work in hi-tech and live in the cities rather than endure the struggles and vagaries of everyday agriculture.

The high-volume days of Cyprus wine, when it sold bulk wine to the Soviet Union and Cyprus Sherry to Britain, have long gone. Today, the wine industry is geared more to quality, with a much smaller production.

Therefore, family agriculture over generations is gradually drying up, leaving the vines to cope alone. Furthermore, the leading wineries prefer to look after their own directly managed vineyards instead of sourcing their fruit from hundreds of small growers.

DANIEL ANASTASIS, a son of Farmakas, remembers those vineyards and grower families as a child. He used to be commandeered to work in the vineyards after school. He remembers his grandfather making wine in the large *pithari* clay jars, which today decorate every winery and the garden of every home; also the donkeys, the farmers' best friends, used in the vineyards and particularly during the harvest.

Circumstance and opportunity took Anastasis overseas, first to Australia and then South Africa. There, he created a family with his wife, Theony (they have three children), and made his name as a master baker.

DANIEL ANASTASIS returned to the village of his youth to save the old vineyards. (Photos: Courtesy)

THE BEAUTIFUL Santa Irene Winery is situated high up in the mountains.

When he returned to Cyprus in 2010 at 65 years old, he was at an age when most people would be considering retirement. However, he was confronted with a forlorn sight. The high-elevation vineyards (up to 1,300 meters elevation) were still there, as were the old vines, ranging from 100 to 150 years old, but some were not worked anymore; and in others, the aging farmers did not have the resources or the energy to manage the vineyards in the future. There is nothing so desperately sad as an abandoned old vineyard.

So Anastasis felt pangs of nostalgia for his childhood and thought he owed it to his grandfather to do something. He understood the potential of those old vineyards shorn of respect and lacking care and attention. He purchased some of them and cajoled some of his neighbors to contribute to others. The vineyard owners were supportive, only too happy that someone would look after their life's work.

In 2016, he founded Santa Irene Winery, named after the local church. Religion is quite powerful in Cyprus. I saw a beautiful old vine, high-elevation vineyard in the Paphos region, with a lovely small chapel at the peak, so the growers can pray for a good year and give thanks for a good yield.

Anastasis started a new career as a winegrower and winemaker with the helpful expertise of viticulturist and winemaker Evangelos Bakalexis. His objective was to coax the ancient but much maligned Mavro vines to produce wines of quality. This was at a time when most quality wineries, bristling with gleaming new-world technology and internationally trained winemakers, had long abandoned the neglected Mavro, preferring either the local Maratheftiko and Yiannoudi, or international varieties such as Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon.

The heart of his search for quality Mavro lay in what he called the *vinea ardua*, which means "arduous vine" in Latin. These special vineyards, ranging from 900



meters to 1,200 meters in elevation, were first harvested in 2020. The slopes are genuinely steep, in some cases reaching 60 degrees. They are not new vineyards planted for ease of managing but ancient vines that have clung onto the slopes of the Troodos Mountains as though hanging on for dear life.

Anastasis brought in expert viticulturists and trained winemakers. These vines were damaged through neglect and needed extraordinary patience and TLC to bring them back to produce quality fruit, but even then, yields were painfully low. At the same time, all vineyard work was extremely difficult and hard physically.

The winery has invested in small, state-of-the-art, stainless steel tanks to aid bringing winemaking into the 21st century. It also has a beautiful still for making Zivania, the national spirit of Cyprus.

However, this did not satisfy Anastasis. He scoured the village for old pithari and refurbished them, bringing them back into use for fermentation. For punching down, he uses a shepherd's staff, which he brandishes almost like a weapon, waving it about. He used it as a pointer during the presentation he gave our group.

Anastasis is now 80 years old and full of energy. Bespectacled, he stands as straight as a guardsman as he receives his guests. He is a performer who relishes an audience. He became animated in front of us, telling stories and reminiscing, occasionally pausing mid-story to bark instructions at his employees before returning with the punch line.

Much of his 50,000-bottle production he sells on-site. He has created a haven for wine tourism, with a large restaurant area capable of accommodating tourists. He also owns a bed & breakfast in the village.

We were hosted by Anastasis, with Dileon Simeon

and Costas Pnanos. The winery produces its value wines under the Santa Irene label, but the crème de la crème is under the Vinea Ardua label. The vines are grown organically. The winery uses natural yeasts, minimum sulphuring, and light or no filtration, depending on the wine.

His leading three wines are named Eteon (meaning "genuine"); Aepys ("steep"); and Aeoneo ("eternal"). The Eteon is a white wine made from Xynisteri.

There are tiny plots of this white variety within the Mavro vineyards, sometimes to the point of being single white varieties in a sea of red. These are carefully picked, part fermented in pithari, and part in stainless steel.

Xynisteri can produce very ordinary wines in low-altitude vineyards, but here, touching the clouds, the result is different. We were served the Eteon 2021, but I would have preferred a more recent vintage.

We also tasted a Blanc de Noir called Danero 2022, and a flavorful rosé called Erroa 2022 – both made from Mavro, of course. The Danero was the one I preferred, as it had a satisfying taut texture from head to tail.

Of the reds, the Aepys 2021 was treated in a modern way, fermented in stainless steel, then aged in old barrels but for only six months so as not swamp the delicate fruit with wood flavors. The Aeoneo 2021 was more traditional, made in an echo of the long-forgotten past. It was fermented in pithari, and then aged in second-use barrels for six months. I preferred it of the two. It had a red nose of red berries and cherries, a medium weight on the palate, and a tannic finish that provided a contrast and had a refreshing quality.

I HAD visited this winery before – before COVID. However, the place still has its magic because of the

beauty of the surroundings. My current visit moved me as much as the first time.

It is certainly wise to book a tour and tasting. The food in Anastasis's spacious Ierambelos restaurant is local, authentic, and delicious.

I was amused to see what looked like challah on display, wrapped up and ready for sale. The braided loaves were like brioche, and Anastasis gave me one to taste. Obviously in the hands of the ex-baker, it was very tasty.

However, though the winery, wine, and food take priority with the hungry and thirsty tourist, do make time to visit the vineyards. Until you have seen the thick-trunked old Mavro vines on the steep slopes, you do not really understand the full picture. These vines are the essence of the winery, and it is with them that the story begins and ends.

Daniel Anastasis is a man who, in a second career at three score and ten, returned to revive agriculture in the mountains surrounding his village. He saved the vineyards from the ignominy of being abandoned, revived winemaking in the ancient way, and determined to make a quality Mavro by focusing on the qualities rather than bemoaning the variety's frailties. Only someone on a driven mission would have persevered.

Quite apart from that, the winery is a wonderful place to visit as a tourist. And if wine bores you, you can go and pet the donkeys, which Anastasis considers part of the family.

The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 38 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com



BREATHTAKING VIEWS of mountains and vines.

MANY OF the vines are more than 130 years old.

THE PITHARI – old clay jars used to make wine.

THE NEW and ancient worlds of winemaking coincide and combine at Santa Irene Winery.