

BEAUTIFUL VLASSIDES Winery.  
(Photos: Courtesy)



# Message in a BOTTLE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**M**y personal infatuation has always been with the wines of the Eastern Mediterranean. I believe the Eastern Mediterranean is one of the most interesting and fastest-developing wine regions. The wines of Lebanon and Israel are so different, yet complementary. The wines of Cyprus, Greece and Turkey are more exotic because of the prevalence of all their indigenous varieties. There is something intoxicating about the high-altitude vineyards, poor stony soils and Mediterranean climate that make this region a wine haven. Certainly, it is a winemaking paradise.

In ancient times this region was the France and Italy in terms of wine production; indeed, this is the region that gave wine culture to the world. The importance of wine in Western Judeo-Christian culture today is because of its importance then, in this same place.

The current renaissance of the Eastern Mediterranean is exciting, and it has become a dynamic region, which combines modern technology, a perfect terroir, against a backdrop of traditions from the ancient wine world.

I learned 35 years ago that making an Eastern Mediterranean section of a wine list was more interesting to the wine consumer than choosing one country only to represent the wine region. When I came to Israel and tried to attract a famous wine journalist to commit to coming, a visit to Israel was not good enough, but a visit to more than one Eastern Med country was an attraction and provided the same writer with many articles.

I once arranged sponsorship at the International Wine & Spirit Competition for a Trophy for the Best

Producer in the Eastern Mediterranean. Imagine my excitement on an unsolicited visit to the Gerovassiliou Winery in Greece a few months ago, and seeing the winning certificate for this trophy hanging up in his cellar.

My unfulfilled dream was to create a wine-marketing consortium called Wines Without Borders, which would feature wineries from Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Lebanon and Turkey. Israel and Lebanon are technically at war, Greece and Turkey are at each other's throats, and Cyprus is a country divided between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. I even contacted possible partners, but I suppose it was a dream before its time.

Therefore, I was recently delighted to learn that wines from Cyprus were making aliyah and coming to Israel. They will be coming in the guise of the two finest wine names in Cypriot wine, Vlassides Winery and Zambartas Wineries. (They are being imported by Barrique in Holon.)

SOPHOCLES VLASSIDES is a legend in the Cyprus wine industry. In fact, he was following his grandfather and father, who had vineyards, but in those days everyone in Cyprus grew grapes, even if it was not their first profession. Vlassides was the first of the new generation to study winemaking abroad. He graduated from the University of California at Davis. He came back with his own dream of what a wine should be, and by example revolutionized Cypriot winemaking. He founded his own winery in 1998 in Kilani, in Limassol's wine region, and also became consultant winemaker to Domaine Argyrides and Tsiakkas Winery.

He chose international varieties simply because he wanted to make great wine, and quickly understood the potential for these wines was greater. He was the first

to age wine in small barrels and to bring international standards to Cyprus.

He is quiet, unassuming and a warm individual, but this does not hide the careful, meticulous, hands-on perfectionist that he is. He measures his words carefully, is cautious but unrelenting in pursuit of excellence. He is stingy with praise for his own creations. If I judge his character correctly, I don't believe he is ever truly happy with any wine he makes.

In 2012 he opened a purpose-built winery in Koilani. Its award-winning design has a focus on metal, glass and wood in a modern, clean-cut style that reeks of elegance. On one side it offers panoramic views of the landscape and the surrounding vineyards, on the other it burrows into the side of a hill.

If Sophocles the winemaker created a new standard for winemakers in Cyprus, the Vlassides Winery is also the pioneering winery in terms of aesthetics, professionalism, technology and beauty.

Vlassides Winery makes wines from Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and the Cypriot variety, Xynisteri. He simply wants to make great wine and feels these varieties offer him the best opportunity. However, he acknowledges that though his Shiraz, for example, is regarded as one of the finest wines in Cyprus, he will not be known worldwide for producing international varieties. So he is growing promising local varieties such as Maratheftiko, Yianoudi and Promara, and making experimental batches. I very much like his Yiannoudi, which he describes as having characteristics of "white pepper, spice and cloves." However, the perfectionist and cautious nature prevails, and it remains an experimental wine.

His labels are rather like the winery. They show simple lines and shapes, which hide a deeper meaning





**XYNISTERI, THE indigenous grape variety, in the Zambartas Mandria vineyard.**

**Vlassides Grifos 2 2017**

This is a fragrant, crisp white wine combining the aroma and acidity of the international Sauvignon Blanc with stone fruit character and freshness of Cyprus's own Xynisteri. Refreshing. NIS 79

**Vlassides Shiraz 2016**

A classic of Cyprus – the most celebrated Shiraz. Brambly fruit, with aromas of raspberry and blackberry, leather and spice, and it exhibits a clean, balanced, lingering finish. NIS 109

**Vlassides Opus Artis 2013**

This is the prestige wine of Vlassides Winery, produced from Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz. It has a soft, velvety fruit-forward character, with an underlying structure, and a fruity spiciness on the palate. One of the leading wines made in Cyprus, no question. NIS 179

**Zambartas Xynisteri 2017**

Unoaked, fresh white wine from high altitude vineyards with aromas of peach and citrus and an intense clean finish. This is a very good example of Cyprus's main indigenous variety. NIS 79

**Zambartas Rosé 2017**

A blend of Lefkada and Cabernet Franc, this is a rosé with bold color, a delicate berry aroma and a medium-bodied flavor and finish. A fine, refreshing but flavorful wine. Ideal with mezes. NIS 84

**Zambartas Maratheftiko 2016**

This is the main quality Cypriot red variety of the moment. (The Mavro is more heavily planted and the newish Yiannoudi may be better quality in the long run.) It has a black cherry berry fruit character backed by the characteristic aromas of violets. Its soft tannins and well-integrated oak make this a very good quality representative of the variety. NIS 109

and hidden truths. Complex, not unlike the master craftsman Sophocles Vlassides himself and his sculptured, handcrafted wines.

AKIS ZAMBARTAS was the CEO and chief winemaker of KEO. I met him when I visited Cyprus in 2003. I remember two things about him: his immediate warmth and kindness and his thick eyebrows. As for his place in Cyprus wine history, he will be remembered for three things in particular, apart from his steering the juggernaut called KEO, then the largest winery on the island.

Firstly, he found, identified, recorded and revived the indigenous varieties of Cyprus that were doomed to extinction. Those using indigenous varieties, apart from Mavro and Xynisteri, have everything to thank him for.

Secondly, he was the first to move his winery from the baking-hot coastal Limassol to the hills near the vineyards. Ktima KEO is now at Malia. This move was followed by all the wineries, new, large and small.

The third thing he did was found a small family winery called Zambartas Wineries in 2006. The win-

ery is situated in the Amvrosios village, which is part of Krascochoria, a.k.a. the Wine Villages of Limassol. Akis's son Marcos Zambartas graduated from Adelaide University and then gained experience in Provence. When his father died before his time, Marcos took over the winery with style and panache.

Marcos Zambartas is a tall, upright figure, with long wavy hair, shoulders back like a guardsman. He looks every bit like a romantic poet-artist. Of course, he also has the family eyebrows. He is a worldly figure, interested in what is happening, eager to learn, friendly and keen to share experiences.

He prefers organic and sustainable vineyard practices. "I don't know if it helps," he says honestly, "but it makes me feel better about myself." His revealing winery slogan is "Family Creation Synergy Nature."

Zambartas was not afraid to seek advice, and for a while used the expertise and experience of Angela Muir MW and her flying winemakers to give assistance in the early days. Since then, they have gone onward and upward and made soulful wines with great flair.

The Zambartas family owns three hectares of vine-

yards and manages another two, and recently purchased a mixed vineyard of mainly Mavro planted in 1921. You visit a vineyard like this with its handmade stone wall, and you get the chills. A time capsule, a vineyard that has survived the test of time, and each gnarled bush vine is in a different grotesque shape, as if to show off its character and individuality.

The winery was initially set up on the principle of blending a local variety with an international variety, and his excellent, deep, complex Lefkada Shiraz shows the wisdom of this, but now they give equal space to local varieties.

Vlassides produces 200,000 bottles, and Zambartas 120,000 bottles. The two small wineries are devoted to quality, making wine to represent the mountainous terroir and delivering the Cyprus message in a bottle. The wines are fascinating. I recommend you introduce yourself to the wines made by our neighbors! ■

*The writer has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years, and is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*



**SOPHOCLES VLASSIDES, arguably the most famous winemaker in Cyprus.**



**FAMILY WINERY owner Marcos Zambartas, considered one of Cyprus's best.**