

WINE OF KINGS KING OF WINES



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The most historic wine of the Eastern Mediterranean is Commandaria, the desert wine from Cyprus. It is the oldest wine brand in the world, and its story encompasses the long history of wine connecting the wines of ancient times with the wines of today. The word Commandaria stems from 'La Grande Commanderie,' the command post of the Knights of St. John, which was situated at Kolossi Castle, west of Limassol, in southern Cyprus, from 1192. The country was then awash with Western Crusaders, rallying to the cause to save Jerusalem from the infidel. The Knights of St. John (referring to John the Baptist of Jerusalem) was a religious military order. They farmed the land, and like monasteries and monks the world over, cared for vineyards and produced wine to make a living.

Their wine was called Commandaria and its association with liquid religion began then, as it was often served as communion or altar wine. When England's King Richard the Lionheart married Berengaria in Limassol, Commandaria was served. He pronounced it as "the wine of kings and the king of wines" – a phrase incidentally also used for Barolo and Tokay. Wilbrand von Oldenburg, the Count of Oldenburg, wrote in 1212, "The wines of this island are so thick and rich as if they are meant to be consumed like honey on bread." Commandaria gained great fame, and praise for the wine was widespread. It was traded around the world.

Production went into recession during the time of the Ottoman Empire. Taxes on wine were high and many farmers abandoned their vineyards. After 1950, the British colonial government brought in a law to protect the Commandaria appellations, and

the traditional villages producing Commandaria entered long-term agreements with the big four wineries that dominated Cypriot wine. These were ETKO, KEO, LOEL and SODAP.

The grapes to make Commandaria must come from 14 villages situated in a demarcated area, in the southeastern foothills of the Troodos Mountains, directly north of Limassol. Only the main two national varieties may be used, that is the Mavro and Xynisteri. Mavro is a red grape, which is the most widespread in Cyprus. It is not a high-quality variety in itself, but can produce light-to-medium-bodied wines with a delicious red cherry, strawberry nose, if handled correctly. The Xynisteri is the national white variety, producing fresh, zesty, citrusy wines. The grapes are grown in low goblet bush vines, so low as to almost be on the ground. Many of the vineyards in these villages are well over 50 years old, so the vines are gnarled – each one showing its own sprawling, grotesque contortions as if to show its individuality. The southern part of the Commandaria region has white chalky soil. As you drive further north, the soil abruptly changes and becomes volcanic.

IN ANCIENT TIMES, this historic wine was called Nama. Hesiod wrote about it in the 8th century BCE. He described the laying of the grapes on drying mats, showing the ancient methods have passed the test of time and technology. Cypriot wine is mentioned in King Solomon's *Song of Songs*. Even in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, a spice had to be macerated in Cypriot wine (Yayin Kafrisin) to make the incense more pungent.

The Cypriot wines (Nama and Commandaria) were always sweet... but through most of our winemaking past, wines were sweet. People had a sweeter tooth. Sweetness was attractive, seductive and nourish-

ing. It was tasty and provided calories. Sourness suggested un-ripeness, was unpalatable and may have represented something dangerous or even poisonous. Above all, sweetness was a preservative that allowed the wines to last and also a tasty overlay that masked a wines' faults. For these reasons, sweet wine continued to be imbibed over the generations.

The grapes for Commandaria must be not only grown but also vinified in the approved region. The harvest is always done manually, usually from about mid-September to October. The shape of the vines, high elevations and sloped vineyards don't lend themselves to mechanical harvesting. After picking, the grapes are laid out in the sun for about a week. The grapes dry out, water evaporates, and they become raisined, leaving the juice more concentrated and viscous.

As soon as fermentation finishes, the village cooperatives transfer the naked wine to the winery that will mature it in order to arrive at the final product. The liqueur wines are fortified, usually with grape alcohol, which brings the wines to about 15% alcohol. They are then aged for a minimum of two years in large, used oak barrels (usually 500 liters or more). The maturation method used in Cyprus is called "mana." This is similar to the solera system in Spain. In Cyprus, one third of the wine is racked off, to be topped up with fresher wine. This can mean that your Commandaria, if no vintage is shown, is likely to be a blend of a number of different vintages.

The Commandaria is then bottled traditionally in a dumpy bottle, not unlike one used for liqueurs. The classic fortified Commandarias made in the traditional way include the ETKO Centurion and St. Nicholas, the KEO St. John, LOEL Alasia and SODAP St. Barnabas.

ARGUABLY, THE finest example of an aged, traditional Commandaria is the Centurion. ETKO

TSIAKKAS WINERY'S
Commandaria vineyard.
(Photos: Courtesy)



From left:
IN CYPRUS, one third
of the wine is racked
off, to be topped with
fresher wine.

ETKO CENTURION, the
finest traditional style
of Commandaria.



ANTHONY AND Olivia
Haggipavlu (second from
left and second from
right, respectively), (ETKO), the fifth
and sixth generation of Cyprus'
oldest winemaking family.

is a firm owned by the Haggipavlu family, which founded the first modern winery in Cyprus in 1844. They became known to me in the 1980s, when I worked for the company in the UK that imported their Emva Sherries. Emva Cream was a massive brand, until the use of the word "sherry" outside Spain was outlawed. In 2003, I went to Cyprus and met the dapper Anthony Haggipavlu, the fifth generation. He was polite, attentive and adept at small talk. I remember he was wearing a tie and blazer and he had something of a British manner about him. He moved the family business from the coast to the mountains, downsized in search of quality and founded Olympus Winery in 1992. On my recent visit, I met the bright, charming Olivia, the 6th generation. The future of Cyprus's oldest winery appears to be in very capable hands!

The ETKO Centurion Commandaria 2000 is made from vines up to 80 years old, from a blend of 55% Mavro and 45% Xynisteri from five villages. The overripe grapes are harvested and left drying in the sun for 15 to 20 days. The grapes are pressed and fermented and then fortified. The wine was then aged for 15 years in French oak barrels. To date, it has been bottle-aged for four years.

Commandaria is a deep amber-tawny, sweet dessert wine. It has rich aromas of dried plums, apricots and raisins, walnuts, with a honeyed dried fruit flavor and a very long, rich and complex finish that goes on and on. The Centurion is just richer and more complex than the younger expressions. It always reminds me of the style of Christmas cake I remember from my youth in England. It was a heavy, rich fruit cake, made with a generous addition of brandy and left to age and develop a depth of flavor that is seared into my taste memory.

I think Commandaria is best served in a white

wine glass, served slightly chilled. It may be enjoyed ice cold as an aperitif (French style). However, it is at its best as a dessert wine with bitter chocolate, blue cheese or traditional Cypriot desserts like soutzioukos, a grape juice jelly with nuts. In fact, it is a dessert in itself. Most classic way to drink it? Enjoy it as an after-dinner drink and sip it through an evening. Most original? Pour it over vanilla ice cream and give yourself a treat!

HOWEVER, THESE DAYS, some progressive wineries are making less heavy, more refreshing modern versions of Commandaria that are giving new energy to the brand. Good examples are from Aes Ambelis, Kyperounda and Tsiakkas wineries. I have tasted them recently and believe the best is the one produced by Tsiakkas Winery, founded by ex-banker Costas Tsiakkas. His son, Orestis, has studied oenology and is now the winemaker. They also make some of the best table wines from indigenous varieties in Cyprus and undoubtedly the finest Zivania (a Cypriot grappa).

The main differences in the new wave Commandarias are that a higher percentage of Xynisteri is used in the blend (sometimes even 100%), from specific old-vine vineyards. The grapes are sun-dried on tents, fermented in temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks, then aged in smaller 300-liter French

and American oak barrels for up to five years. Great efforts are made to avoid oxidation and preserve varietal characteristics. The wines are vintage wines and they tend to be bottled in attractive bottles more associated with quality dessert wines, than the traditional Commandaria bottle. The Tsiakkas Commandaria 2012 has the intense sweetness expected, aromas of over-ripe apricots and figs, yet it is balanced by good acidity and is almost fresh to drink and certainly not cloying. The new sun-dried, unfortified style is far from the rich, syrupy character of the traditional Commandarias.

Unfortunately, sweet wines are not so popular today, but it is not just Commandaria. Port and Ma-

but sadly passé and out of fashion in a world where people are conscious of diets and alcohol consumption. However, Commandaria is a time capsule wine that connects nearly 3,000 years of winemaking. It brings to the fore a style of winemaking used in ancient times, and though I am a fan of the new wave of Cypriot wines, Commandaria remains the island's greatest product. ■

The writer has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years and is referred to as the English voice of Israel wine.
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