



# EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, the candidate should be able to:

- Identify the physical location and general climate of Greece's major wine regions.
- Understand the hierarchy of wine designations used in Greece.
- Recognize significant appellations in Greece and their primary grape varieties.
- Describe the style and source of Commandaria.
- Understand the general status of the Israeli wine industry.

The eastern Mediterranean region is the historic cradle of wine trade. Wine and wine grapes reached the shores of the Mediterranean from the East before recorded history, and the great civilizations that developed there did much to advance viticulture and wine production. From Phoenicia and Greece, the culture of wine spread first to the Romans and then to other western Europeans. War and, in some cases, religious influences that restrain the use of alcohol ended much of the winegrowing in the region, although Greece remains a preeminent producer in the eastern Mediterranean. Today, wine production is a rising phenomenon in Israel, Lebanon, Cyprus, and Türkiye (Turkey).

### GREECE

Greece has a long vinous history dating back at least 4,000 years. Greek wines were exported all over the Western world in ancient times. However, during the Middle Ages, Ottoman rulers placed

heavy taxes on wines that were sold to outsiders. This crippled the potentially thriving industry, and for a time Greek wines disappeared from the international market.

It wasn't until quite recently that Greece once again became recognized as a world-class producer of wine. Even into the late twentieth century, the only Greek wine known to most consumers was retsina, a unique wine flavored with pine resin. Pine resin had been used as a preservative and a means of preventing oxidation in Greek wine in ancient times, and modern retsina is seen as a traditional product. However, for the majority of wine consumers, retsina only reinforces the impression of Greek wines as outdated and poorly made.

Conversely, today's Greek wines are clean, fresh, balanced, and food-friendly. A new generation of modern winemakers, aided by Greece's entry into the European Union, has initiated a remarkable renaissance. Increasing numbers of well-crafted Greek wines have appeared, made from interesting but unfamiliar indigenous grape varieties. These products are eclipsing the memory of Greece's resinated and oxidized wines and are giving consumers new alternatives to wines made from international grape varieties.



Figure 15–1: Vineyards in Santorini

## GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

Greece is located in southeastern Europe, south of Albania, Macedonia, and Bulgaria. It consists primarily of a mountainous peninsula surrounded on three sides by the Mediterranean Sea. Geographically, it resembles an outstretched hand reaching into the water. To the west, across the Ionian Sea, is the tip of the Italian Peninsula; to the south, Libya and Egypt; and to the east—across the Aegean Sea—Türkiye (Turkey). Greece also includes the major island of Crete and several archipelagoes with 3,000 smaller islands. Some of these islands are in the Ionian Sea, but most are in the Aegean.

The upper part of the Greek peninsula comprises the political and historical areas of Thrace, Macedonia, Epirus, and Thessalia. Farther south is the region of Attica and the capital city, Athens. Not far from Athens, the almost insular Peloponnese Peninsula clings onto the rest of Greece at the narrow Isthmus of Corinth. The Peloponnese has the highest concentration of vineyards in all of Greece.

With the sea never far away, the climate throughout Greece is classic Mediterranean, with slight temperature variations from north to south and substantial differences due to elevation. High mountains run the length of the country, especially along the western side, blocking much of the rainfall and causing the rain-shadowed eastern side of the peninsula to be significantly drier than the Ionian side.

The warm, sunny Mediterranean climate makes Greece a natural country for viticulture. Vines are planted throughout the mainland and on almost every habitable island. The trend in new plantings has been toward hillside vineyards at higher elevations, some above 2,500 feet (760 m), in order to take advantage of cooler temperatures.



Figure 15–2: View of the Acropolis and Likavitos, Athens, Greece

### **Grape Varieties**

With over 300 cataloged indigenous grapes, Greece provides great diversity and originality in its wines.

Its standouts include three reds:

- *Agiorgitiko*: One of the most widely planted red varieties of Greece, Agiorgitiko (“Saint George’s grape”) is named for the Chapel of Saint George, located in the town of Nemea. Grown mainly in the Peloponnese region, Agiorgitiko is often used to produce tannic, spicy, flavorful red wines (both dry and sweet). It may also be used to produce lighter red wines (often made by carbonic maceration) as well as rosé.
- *Xinomavro* (alternately, Xynómavro): Another of the most widely planted red grapes of Greece, Xinomavro—meaning *acid black*—is a specialty of the northern areas, including Macedonia and Thessalia. Xinomavro, best-known as the sole variety allowed in the wines of the Naoussa PDO, is used to produce a range of wines from dry, spicy red wines with aromas of red fruit to sparkling wines and rosé in a range of sweetness levels.

- *Mavrodaphne*: Mavrodaphne (meaning *black laurel*) is primarily used to produce sweet fortified wines—such as Mavrodaphne of Patras and Mavrodaphne of Cephalonia. These wines—silky, sweet, and complex—are often compared to ruby or tawny Port.

The most respected white varieties include the following:

- *Moschofilero*: A pink grape akin to Pinot Gris that comes from the Mantinia region of the Peloponnese. It has high acidity with floral and spicy aromas.
- *Assyrtiko* (alternately, Asyrtiko or Assyrtico): A high-acid white variety originally from Santorini but now found throughout the country. Assyrtiko is used for dry and sweet white wines.
- *Muscat* (Moschato): The well-known ancient variety found throughout the Mediterranean; almost always used for sweet wines such as Muscat of Samos, as well as those from Rio Patras and Patras. Muscat often produces wines with notes of apricot, honey, orange peel, and spice.
- *Athiri*: Grown in Rhodes and Santorini, this grape provides wines with low acidity, good weight, and high aromatics.
- *Roditis*: One of the most widely planted white grapes in the nation, Roditis produces easy-drinking white wines with crisp, fruity flavors.

Among the international varieties, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah are well-known in Greek vineyards. Syrah, in particular, has made significant inroads, especially on the mainland. International grape varieties such as these are generally considered to be nontraditional and are rarely found in wines at the PDO level.

### **Greek Wine Laws**

Greece has a quality system in accordance with EU standards and overseen by the Greek Wine Institute.

- Basic Greek table wine—categorized as *epitrapézios óinos* (EO)—accounts for approximately one-half of the country's total

wine production.

- Greece has over 100 areas with protected geographical indication (PGI) status; the traditional term for this category is *topikos oínos* (TO). Many of these appellations correspond to the major political regions of Greece such as Crete, Thessalia, and Peloponnese; others may be as small as a district or a single estate.
- Greek PDO wines fall into two categories—OPE (*onomasía proeléfseos eleghoméní*), typically reserved for sweet wines, and OPAP (*onomasía proeléfseos anotéras poiótitos*), used for dry, unfortified wines. However, these terms are rarely seen on wine labels; most of the top-quality wine destined for export will be labeled with the phrase “PDO Wines of Greece” and one of the country’s numerous appellations.

The country’s best-known wines include Retsina (traditionally flavored with resin) and Verdea, an oxidative white wine. A special category—*onomasía katá parádosi* (OKP/appellation by tradition)—protects these traditional wines of Greece without tying them to a specific area.

### **Greek Appellations**

Few of Greece’s appellations are particularly well-known outside the country. Many of Greece’s modern winemakers are currently dissatisfied with the limitations of the appellation system and want to experiment with non-traditional varieties, blends of indigenous and international varieties, or unconventional blends of native varieties. Therefore, some of the most exciting Greek wines do not conform to the quality wine definition and must be labeled as TO or even EO. In such cases, grape variety and producer, not appellation, are the determinants of quality.

Among the existing appellations, the following regions and wines are well-known and generally well respected internationally:

*Macedonia*



- Amyndeon (Amyndaio): dry to off-dry red and rosé, made from Xinomavro
- Côtes de Meliton: red and white wines, produced using Greek and French varieties
- Goumenissa: dry red, from Xinomavro and Negóska
- Naoussa: dry to off-dry red, from Xinomavro

### *Peloponnese*

- Mantinia: dry white, from Moschofilero
- Mavrodaphne of Patras: sweet fortified red, from Mavrodaphne
- Nemea: the largest red wine appellation in Greece; highly regarded reds (both dry and sweet) from Agiorgitiko
- Patras: elegant, dry whites from Roditis, known for citrus aromas and flavors

### *Aegean Islands*

The volcanic island of Santorini has an extremely dry and windy climate that requires vines to be trained low to the ground to avoid being damaged. The vines are often trained in a basket or wreath shape known as a *stefani*. In spite of this inhospitable climate, Assyrtiko thrives here, producing wines that have vibrant acidity and minerality and that develop a beautiful richness over time. The dry white wines of the Santorini PDO must be produced using a minimum of 75% Assyrtiko.

- Vinsanto: Dried-grape wines known as Vinsanto are also produced in the Santorini PDO. These wines are typically unfortified and naturally sweet, although the production of fortified Vinsanto is also allowed. Vinsanto must be barrel-aged for a minimum of two years, although many versions are aged for much longer.

## CYPRUS

Cyprus is a large island in the far-eastern Mediterranean that is



currently divided politically between Greek and Turkish factions. It has a long history of wine production, but today it is known primarily for Commandaria, a sweet amber-colored dessert wine with an ancestry dating back four millennia. Commandaria is made using sun-dried Mavro (red) and Xynisteri (white) varieties, vinified separately or as a blend. Due to the high sugar content of the dried grapes, Commandaria generally reaches high levels of alcohol via natural fermentation (although it is also allowed to be fortified with grape spirits). The wine is required to be aged for at least two years in wood, although the aging regimen typically goes on for much longer. Traditionally, producers of Commandaria used a complex aging system known as the *mana system* (somewhat similar to the solera system used in Jerez).

# Main Wine Regions of Greece



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Figure 15–3: Greek wine regions

Table 15–1: PDO Wines of Greece

Region	PDO Wines
Aegean Islands	Lemnos OPAP Malvasia Paros OPAP Muscat of Rhodes OPE Muscat of Lemnos OPE Paros OPAP Rhodes OPAP Samos OPE Santorini OPAP
Crete	Archanes OPAP Candia OPAP Dafnes OPAP Malvasia Candia OPAP Malvasia Sitia OPAP Peza OPAP Sitia OPAP
Epirus	Zitsa OPAP
Ionian Islands	Mavrodaphne of Cephalonia OPE Muscat of Cephalonia OPE Robola of Cephalonia OPAP
Macedonia	Amynteo OPAP Goumenissa OPAP Naoussa OPAP Slopes of Meliton OPAP
Peloponnese	Mantinia OPAP Mavrodaphne of Patras OPE Monemvassia-Malvasia OPAP Muscat of Patras OPE Muscat of Rio Patras OPE Nemea OPAP Patras OPAP
Thessalia	Anchialos OPAP Messenikola OPAP Rapsani OPAP
Source: New Wines of Greece, winesofgreece.org, regional websites, 2022	

## TÜRKIYE (TURKEY)

Türkiye (Turkey)—a relatively liberal Islamic state with one foot in Europe and the other in Asia—is one of the largest grape-growing countries in the world. Türkiye is home to over 600 Indigenous vinifera varieties; of these, at least 60—including Yapincak (white), Papazkarasi (red), Öküzgözü (red), Boğazkere (red), and Çalkarasi (red)—are used for commercial wine production. However, the vast majority of the country’s grapes are sold as table grapes or raisins.

Most of the country’s current laws and regulations regarding wine are administered by the Tobacco and Alcohol Market Regulatory

Council, which focuses mainly on the sales and distribution side of the industry. Other wine regulations include a basic set of viticultural standards, written into the country's overall "Law of Agricultural Insurance" in 2005. Most of the wines of Türkiye are rarely seen outside the country, however, Kavaklıdere—its largest producer—does export its wines internationally. Production includes wines from both native and international varieties.

## LEBANON

Lebanon is a multicultural country with a sizable Christian minority and a long connection with the French, and thus it is not too surprising that there is a small wine community here. Most of the vineyards are located at fairly high elevations in the western Bekaa Valley to take advantage of nighttime cooling. Some producers are experimenting with areas in the eastern Bekaa Valley as well as in Batroun and Jezzine. The country's wine industry is based largely on the reputation of one producer, Chateau Musar, although a handful of others are gaining recognition as well. International grapes (mainly French) are grown in most regions, as well as a handful of ancient, indigenous varieties such as Obeideh and Merwah (both white).

Founded in 1997, the *Union Vinicole du Liban* (Viticultural Union of Lebanon) is leading the efforts to formulate a comprehensive modern wine law for Lebanon, and a significant set of such laws was passed in 2000. These new regulations replaced the previous set of laws that had been in place since 1938. Based loosely on the French AOC system, Lebanon's new wine laws outline many of the significant elements of wine production, including regions of origin, labeling terminology, and viticultural practices.

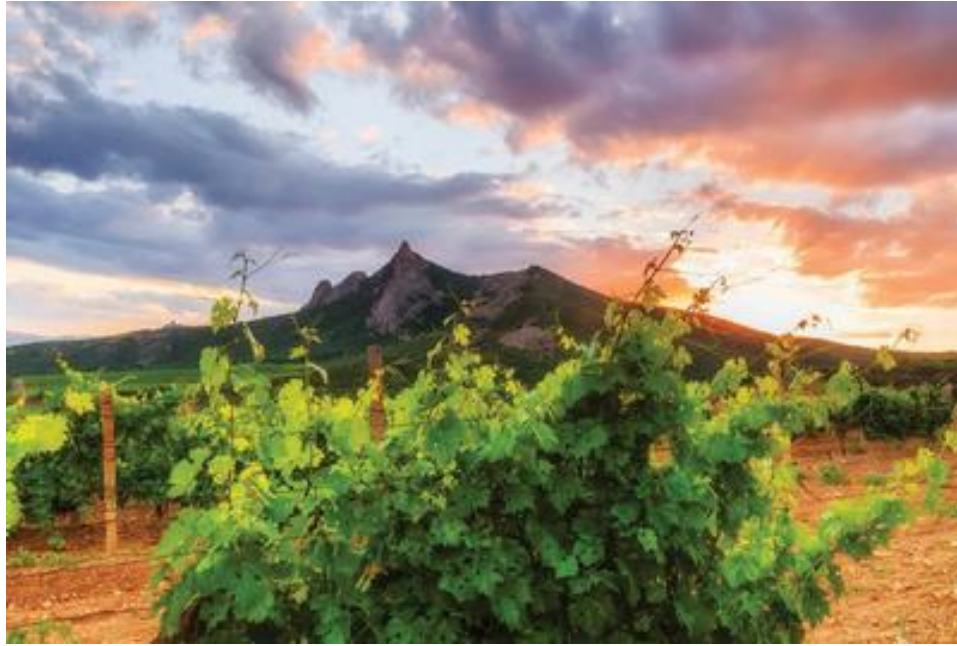


Figure 15–4: Vineyards in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley

## ISRAEL

Israel is a small country located on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. The region’s ancient history of grape growing, wine production, and exportation of wine before the common era (BCE) is well-known and widely documented. Throughout the centuries—and despite the obstacles of desert heat, intermittent drought, and periodic warfare—the area has persisted in the production of high-quality grapes and wine.

The present-day wine industry in the region dates to the late 1800s. In 1855, the Cremisan Wine Estate—along with the Cremisan Monastery of the Salesian Order—was established in the area between Jerusalem and the West Bank. Around this same time, Baron Edmond de Rothschild (1845-1934), one of the owners of Bordeaux’s Château Lafite, began to invest in the region. He purchased property in the area around Mount Carmel, imported modern production equipment, and provided vine cuttings from Château Lafite. The enterprise thus founded—Carmel Winery—is now the largest-producing winery in the area.

Despite the country's small size—it measures about 263 miles/424 km from north to south and about 84 miles/135 km across its widest point—there are significant differences in the climate and terroir across the area. The wine map of the region and the official designation of appellations are still evolving. However, much of the quality wine is produced in Galilee (a high-elevation region located in the north of the country), the Central Mountains (covering the center of the country, including the Judean Hills and Mount Carmel, and the Judean Foothills (nestled between the Mediterranean Coast and the mountains west of Jerusalem). Viticulture in the semi-arid Negev region, located in the southern part of the country, is made possible by drip irrigation, invented by Israeli water engineer Simcha Blass in the mid-20th century.

Classic international grape varieties—including Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Carignan, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Viognier—make up a large proportion of Israel's vineyards. Indigenous varieties, including Argaman (a red Carignan X Sousão cross created in 1972), Marawi (a white grape traced back to the 17th century), and Dabouki (a red variety) are being planted as well.