

## JANCIS ROBINSON: Lyrarakis New Releases

By Julia Harding MW  
22 Jul 2020

*A family-owned winery on Crete with a passion for indigenous varieties and nuanced winemaking, not to mention great labels like the one shown below for their latest Vidiano bottling.*

'It has been a very interesting year so far', replies managing director Bart Lyrarakis when I ask him for news of the estate created by his family in 1966. 'It is certainly testing our limits in many dimensions, but I guess we'll all go through this and come out stronger! Not just us here on Crete, but everyone, worldwide.'

I've been tasting the increasingly diverse, distinctive and delicious wines of Lyrarakis over the last decade, having first encountered them at the Oenorama wine fair in Athens in February 2010, when I was on the hunt for lesser-known indigenous varieties to include in *Wine Grapes*. The re-evaluation and rescue of such varieties is one of their hallmarks and a driving force behind their success. This year they have planted another 0.3 ha (0.74 acres) of the local dark-skinned grape Liatiko around the winery, using cuttings from century-old vines in eastern Crete, and produced a second wine from their beloved Vidiano.



The family, pictured below, own 15 ha (37 acres) and they buy fruit from local trusted growers grouped together under the name Saint August but whom export manager Effie Kallinikidou calls their 'extended family'. These growers own some of the single-vineyard sites that are named on the labels, including Ippodromus, Plakoura and Pirovolikes. They work according to guidelines set out by Lyrarakis's vineyard manager Nikos Somarakis (pictured further below), who also provides training and audits the vines.



*The Lyrarakis family, left to right: George, Bart (MD), Sotiris (Bart's father, co-founder), Lambros, George (president), Katerina (hospitality manager), Manolis (Sotiris's brother and co-founder)*



Some years ago they rescued the local light-skinned Melissaki – the name hinting at the slight honeyed aroma that it gives since *mélissa* is Greek for 'bee' – in the foothills of Mount Psiloritis in central Crete. They took cuttings and in 2010 planted it in their Gerodeti vineyard, dry-farmed like almost all their vines. They made the first commercial vintage in 2012 – not long enough ago for it to appear in *Wine Grapes* – and have continued to experiment with the winemaking style. The 2016 vintage, the first I tasted, was fermented with selected organic yeasts (isolated from certified-organic vineyards) in tank but the 2019, reviewed below, was fermented in new and used French oak barrels (400 litres) by local yeasts isolated from the Gerodeti vineyard, with one month on skins, then aged briefly in the same barrels. It is a terrific wine which exemplifies their thoughtful approach to adapting the winemaking to these fascinating varieties.

*Melissaki grown in the Gerodeti vineyard in Alagni, central Crete*

Vidiano is another one of their treasured whites. There are now two in the range, the oaked single-vineyard Ippodromos, always one of my favourites, and now another version with the striking label above, nicknamed ‘the queen’. Their estate wines such as the Kotsifali/Syrah blend (one of the few to include an international variety) and the white Muscat of Spina/Vidiano combination are also excellent, and well priced. I’d also pick out the dry, serious single-vineyard Kedros rosé (the Kedros vineyard is shown at the top of this article, photo by Nikos Somarakis), new for the 2019 vintage and made from the Cretan dark-skinned Liatiko grape. They are also credited with having rescued the laurel-scented Dafni and the fragrant/herbal Plyto white varieties.



*Viticulturist (and photographer) Nikos Somarakis harvesting Liatiko*

Bart Lyrarakis does not seem too worried about the 2020 harvest, other than their annual anxieties about the weather. When he wrote to me in late June, he reported that ‘So far it has been a great vintage. Everything is healthy and doing very well.’ He added that, although there had been very few cases of COVID-19 on the island, ‘It will be hard of course from a commercial side (declining sales of wine worldwide, especially in touristic areas like ours), so this might also affect some farmer relationships, but I am optimistic our very long and close relationships with “our own” farmers are a guarantee of a mutually satisfying harvest.’ He is very aware of the difficulties faced by many producers in France and other parts of Europe where poor sales have led to a lack of storage capacity and a vast amount of subsidised distillation.



Oenotourism is very important to the company, as a quick glance at their [website home page](#), above, will tell you. Crete started to open up to tourists again on 15 June but Bart expected the season to get going this month. I look forward to the day when I can see vineyards such as this for myself.

*Vidiano in the rocky, dry-farmed clay-dominated soils of the Ippodromos vineyard, at an elevation of 610 m in Panorama, central Crete (Nikos Somarakis)*

Wine is always a team effort. When I asked Bart for a photo, he sent me this one from 2017, the biggest they have, but pointed out, ‘The team is big! We never managed to make one all together’.



Lyrarakis clearly have an excellent export department since their wines are available in 30 countries, including most of Europe, China, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Brazil. Their UK importer is Berry Bros & Rudd and for the US it's USA Wine West (contact [usa@lyrarakis.com](mailto:usa@lyrarakis.com)). See also Nick's account of a [Cretan dinner](#) in London at The Greek Larder (now sadly closed).

The 15 wines below are grouped by colour and then shown in the order tasted. All the wines are certified vegan-friendly; when wines need [fining](#), this is carried out with either [bentonite](#) or plant proteins.

## White

### [Lyrarakis, Vóila Assyrtiko 2019 PGI Crete](#)

*Vóila is the name of the area, in Sitia, eastern Crete. Dry-farmed on loam at 580 m. 16 hours' skin contact at 16 °C. Fermented slowly in tank at 14 °C. TA 6.85 g/l, pH 3.05.*

There's definitely the stony/steely/dusty character of this variety but also a marked note of pure citrus, even a dash of lime and spice. Power and drive on the palate, tension and excellent freshness. Shows that you can make very good Assyrtiko on Crete not just on Santorini. Salty and mouth-watering on the long finish. Bone dry and perfectly balanced with good length. (JH)

13.5%      Drink 2020 – 2023      16.5

### [Lyrarakis, Psarades Vineyard Dafni 2019 PGI Crete](#)

*Dry-farmed at 480 m in Alagni, central Crete. Skin contact for 10 hours for 5% of the grapes that are harvested early and fermented separately. Fermented in tank at 17–19 °C and aged 4 months on lees. TA 5 g/l, pH 3.33, RS 2.18 g/l.*

Intense aroma of bayleaf and rosemary, dramatically herbal without being green or unripe. The small percentage that had skin contact has given this a brilliantly judged texture, just a very slight grip, so it is not just about the aromatics. Moderate acidity, but freshened by that grip and the low pH. Wonderfully aromatic and so true to the variety, without being a caricature. (JH)

12%      Drink 2020 – 2021      16.5

### [Lyrarakis, Psarades Vineyard Plyto 2019 PGI Crete](#)

*From Psarades, Alagni, central Crete. Dry farmed at 480 m. Harvested in two phases. Organic selected yeasts. TA 6.3 g/l, pH 3.38, RS 1.65 g/l.*

This has some of the herbal character of the Dafni, and lifted aromas, but also more fruit on the nose and a more complex intensity. Slightly peachy but mostly herbal citrus and a stony/mineral undertow. Fuller bodied than the Dafni, with some weight and body from the higher alcohol and fruit depth. This doesn't seem to have the small oak-fermented component of the 2018. Firm, deep and long. A fresh, distinctive white with quite full body and an attractive herbal/sour freshness on the finish. Impressive persistence and purity, as with all the Lyrarakis whites. (JH)

13%      Drink 2020 – 2022      16.5

### [Lyrarakis, Gerodeti Melissaki 2019 PGI Crete](#)

*Gerodeti vineyard is in Alagni, central Crete, in the foothills of Mount Psiloritis. Dry-farmed at 480 m. Macerated on skins for four weeks in new and second-use 400-litre French oak ('Pearl' barrels). Fermented with yeasts from the vineyard. Then aged 10 weeks. TA 5.2 g/l, pH 3.56, RS 2.7 g/l.*

Although this is a relatively recent addition to the Lyrarakis range, and another variety they have rescued, this is one of my favourites. Medium gold colour. I find the aroma intoxicating, making me think of burnished gold and dried apricots though there is also something more like Lapsang Souchong tea, an aroma I associate with skin contact. That smoky character on the palate too. The skin contact structures the wine here and the acidity is fresh but not dominant. As befits a variety of this name, there is a honeyed note, plus something smoky. A complex 'orange wine' that avoids excess but has terrific intensity and complexity. A great advert for skin-contact wine and the style really seems to suit the variety. (JH)

13%      Drink 2021 – 2026      17.5



## Rosé

### [Lyrarakis, Kedros Rosé Liatiko 2019 PGI Crete](#)

*Dry-farmed at 850 m. Low bush vines. Fermented in tank with selected organic yeast. TA 5.62 g/l, pH 3.29, RS < 2 g/l.*

Pale orangey gold. Rose-hip and Victoria (orange) plum fruit with a touch of dusty-stone minerality. Beautifully dry and taut on the palate. Fresh and yet with fruit intensity and real depth and length. A serious rosé where the seriousness is purely from the quality of the fruit. Slightly chewy texture suggests this would be good with food but it is vibrant enough to be drunk on its own. (JH)

13.5%      Drink 2020 – 2024      17

## Red

### [Lyrarakis, Aggelis Liatiko 2018 PGI Crete](#)

*Loamy soils in Sitia, eastern Crete. Dry-farmed at 580 m. Ungrafted vines planted in the 1930s. Picked in two passes over three weeks. Bunches fermented almost whole in old open-topped oak barrels. No temperature control and no fining. TA 5.17 g/l, pH 3.59.*

Typically light and brick ruby colour. Fabulous tangy aroma of tart red berries, sour cherry and hints of orange. This tastes as if it has higher acidity than the numbers indicate, it is concentrated, tense and super-zesty, with the roundness of fruit depth and alcohol. It's a very distinctive wine, with some dried red fruits too. The tannins are tight and upright, and seem to accentuate the freshness. This is a wine that should have very long ageing capacity, if some of the mature Liatikos I have tasted are anything to go by. Definitely one of a kind. Terrific intensity and length. While it is clean and well made, it is absolutely the opposite of soulless 'modern wine'. (JH)

14%      Drink 2020 – 2028      17 ++

### [Lyrarakis, Plakoura Mandilaria 2017 PGI Crete](#)

*Stony sandy loam in the Karkadiotisa area of central Greece. Dry-farmed at 500 m. 11% of the grapes were sun-dried for 5 days. Fermented with selected yeasts at 25–27 °C and aged 12 months in a mix of new and used French (53%) and American (47%) oak. TA 6.9 g/l, pH 3.16, RS 2.95 g/l.*

Deep cherry red. Seductively sweet and aroma dark-red cherry fruit, ripe but doesn't smell raisined even though there is a touch of dried cherry. Lightly floral as well as some sweet spice from the oak and from the fruit. There's marked oak flavour on the palate but it's the acidity that is so striking – bright, mouth-watering, almost tart but actually in balance with the fruit sweetness. An extreme wine that you could not ignore, packed with ripe fruit. Just a little warming on the finish. Tannins are lightly grainy, moderate but definite. I would want to drink this slightly cool with rich pork flavours, perhaps with a tangy cheddar? I think this will get really interesting with some time in the bottle. (JH)

13%      Drink 2020 – 2027      16.5