Liatiko

By Yiannis Karakasis MW

At a glance

Liatiko is not just a classic Cretan indigenous variety. It is Crete's treasure, with **400 ha** of plantings. Its lineage goes so far back in time that it is regarded as an ancestor of the Corinthian grape used since ancient times as a table grape. During the past couple of decades, it has managed to step out of the shadows due to the work of quality-driven producers and is, for Crete, a blue-chip on the rise. **It produces wines of silk and cashmere. Wines that can be enjoyed in their youth but can improve with cellaring.**

Although very dark-skinned, it makes relatively pale wines that tend to turn to brick orange fairly quickly. Its appearance resembles Nebbiolo, and this is not their only common element. Its pale colour, rich natural sugars and tendency for oxidation mean that it often ends up as a sweet wine. But the grandest Liatiko emerges as a dry version when its generous tannins have been extracted from the skins and balance its natural sweetness. **It is this game of sugars versus tannins that can craft memorable wines.** It also blends exceptionally well with Mandilari, which is its opposite: deeply coloured and much more acidic, but lacking the central palate fleshiness that Liatiko has in abundance.

Its aromas are like walking into an Asian spice shop full of cardamom and cumin, around a core of tar and dried

cherries. Its dry wines are full of flavour, character and texture. It also shows the scent of figs and raisins in the sweet versions. Full-bodied, with soft tannins and moderate acidity. Like a hug.

History

The cultivation of Liatiko dates back to the 3rd or 2nd century BC, as shown by the dating of the grape residues found in presses in the ‘Melissa’ location, within the zone of Dafnes. A manuscript dated 1432 AD by Pietro Querini, a Venetian feudal lord of Crete, is kept in the Vatican Apostolic Library of Rome and refers to barrels with Liatiko from Dafnes.

Costacurta et al. (2006), using molecular analysis, studied the possible existence of a genetic relationship or genetic similarity between Greek vine varieties and Italian vine varieties, particularly those found in the southern regions (Campania, Calabria, Sicily, Basilicata). This study showed a genetic relationship between Corinto Nero grown in Italy, with the Corinthian raisin and Liatiko. The results of this research confirm the view of Kribas (1943), according to which there is a variation of the variety with the name Psilorogo Zibbibo, which produces grapes that look like those of raisins. It may be the ancestor of the Corinthian raisin, which emerged through mutation.

Its name allegedly derives from *iouliatiko*, which refers to July, when Liatiko is supposedly harvested. However, Liatiko is harvested in mid-late August in Dafnes and later in Sitia, in September. So Liatiko refers to the size of the berry resembling an olive (elia in Greek).

In the vineyard

There is great clonal diversity, with more than ten biotypes easily identified in the vineyard. Liatiko from Sitia, especially from old vines, is less productive and differs from Liatiko of other areas. In the PDO Sitia zone, most of the vineyards are usually trained as bush vines. Moreover, a high percentage (approximately 90%) of old vines are found in the zone.

?t is a vigorous, productive, disease and drought-resistant variety with medium to large-sized bunches. Susceptible to oïdium.

A high percentage of old vines (90%) perform better with short pruning since there is a tendency for increased vigour at the tips.

Terroirs

In Sitia (PDO optional blending with Mandilari)

Here Liatiko is planted in a varied landscape that changes immensely from near sea level to almost 650 m elevation. Best results come from the hillside vineyards of this semi-mountainous area. Presently, about 600–700 ha of plantings produce PDO wines supplemented by a small dose of Mandilari (not mandatory). From 2012 Liatiko should be a minimum of 80% of the PDO blend. No other wine grape is so inextricably linked to Crete's place than is Liatiko to Sitia.

In Dafnes (PDO optional blending with Mandilari)

A minimum of 80% of Liatiko may be blended with Mandilari. In Dafnes, the vineyards range from 150–600 m altitude, and the vines are grown on slopes.

The vineyards are located northeast of Psiloritis Mountain. The wider area’s topography is formed by rolling hills, almost parallel to each other, extending from the northern part of the prefecture to the south at 300–500 m. The vineyards are planted on the slopes of these hills, with eastern or western exposure.

The valleys formed between the hills serve as natural canals, conducting cooling breezes from the Cretan Sea, thereby ameliorating slope temperatures during the summer. Rainfall is rare in the summer months. The soils are limestone with good drainage, so plants and grapes are not susceptible to fungal diseases.

Wine styles

Stylistically the dry wines are not for the faint-hearted (sweet wines are also produced). They are powerful, not in terms of alcohol, as this tends to be moderated by the altitude and breezy nights, but with plenty of weight. One could compare them to a traditional or less polished version of a Piemontese wine, full of herbal undertones and dried red fruits, and with firm but not aggressive tannins as well as bright acidity.

Notable producers

Boutari (sweet)

DAF

Diamantakis

Douloufakis (dry red and sweet)

Efrosyni

Oikonomou (dry red and sweet)

Idaia (dry red and sweet)

Karavitakis

Lyrarakis (dry red and rose)

Silva (dry red and sweet)

Toplou

Ageing potential

Liatiko wines can be delicious when young, combining perfume and ripeness, but can also be rewarding up to 8–10 years following the harvest.

Perfect pairing

Try it with any tomato-based dish or grilled pork chops.

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