

Ancient Cypriot wine enters vintage major league

NICOSIA - Cyprus's ancient dessert wine Commandaria is going up-market from early 2010, with a selection of its more mature vintages in stylish bottles aiming for a more discerning consumer.



This undated handout photo shows wine jugs on display in a vineyard in Erimi, Cyprus.

Thought to be the world's oldest wine in continuous production, Commandaria was first described in 800 BC by the Greek poet Hesiod as a popular tippie with the ancient Greeks. Its present name was bestowed by 12th century crusaders. "The aroma of Commandaria cannot be made just anywhere, the specific altitude and the limestone soil are what make it unique," said

Andreas Panayides, who organizes an annual fair on Cyprus to honor the wine.

A sweet wine, Commandaria is still produced on the Mediterranean island in the same way as in antiquity.

Made from two types of indigenous Cyprus grapes — Xynisteri and Mavro — the overripe grapes are laid out in the sun to further increase the

sugar density before the wine is aged in oak barrels for at least three years.

Traditionally found in a squat, brown bottle, the amber-colored drink will soon be sold in a variety of stylishly designed bottles by the four main wine distilleries on the island.

"The style of the bottles used have been the same for the past 30 years at least. We

need to do something to bring Commandaria on a par with other European wines," said Giorgos Hadjiafxentis, senior officer for the promotion of export of agricultural products at the Commerce Ministry.

A starting price of 50 euros (\$71) for a 10-year vintage is anticipated compared to the modest 12 euros (\$17) for a 75 ml (2.640 fl oz) bottle at present.

With a Protected Designation of Origin, Commandaria must have a 22.5 percent total potential alcohol level.

It is produced exclusively by 14 villages some 400-800 meters high on the southern slopes of the Troodos mountain range, which formed the headquarters of the Knights Templar, known as the "Grand Commanderie."

Legend said Commandaria was the wine of choice at the

momentous 1363 Feast of the Five Kings in the City of London. King Richard the Lionheart of England, who married in Cyprus, is said to have enjoyed it so much at his wedding feast in 1191 that he pronounced it the "wine of kings and the king of wines."

"Our aim is to boost Commandaria's image," Panayides said. Some 1.4 million liters (369,800 U.S. gallons) of Commandaria was produced in 2008, with exports as far as Japan and Australia. Data from the Cyprus Wine Products Council showed that last year Sweden topped the export list at 22,806.00 liters.

"Consumption has risen by over 80 percent since 2002 across Cyprus," Panayides said, mainly due to a growing awareness and appreciation of local produce.

Pacific crewman on hijacked ship

The crew of a ship hijacked by Somali pirates - who include at least one man from the Mariana islands in the Pacific - say they are running out of food and water. They have been reduced to catching condensation from air-conditioning units to drink. Families know their condition because the pirates allowed the captain to make a call to his family - the only crew member allowed to do so. The brother of a Radio Australia reporter in the Marianas, Gemma Casas, is among the captives. She told Radio Australia's Pacific Beat that her brother, who is an employee of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), took six months leave to work as a ship's master electrician. He had been seeking a change from his usual job and his decision to sail was taken on a whim. But he is now one of the captives on the Greek-owned MV Irene Em, which was hijacked by Somali pirates along the Gulf of Aden in April. The self-governing Marianas are an American-administered territory in the western Pacific. Families believe the pirates taking the Irene Em wanted to prove the US action was just a temporary setback in their work. Ransom demands have been made. Gemma Casas said family and friends are becoming increasingly concerned, one reason being the intense emotional ordeal for the crew.

All aboard for a Greek adventure

Greek Cafes were once the social hubs of western Queensland towns and next week (August 18) UQ PhD student Toni Risson will board the Q150 train to embark on a journey of multicultural discovery.

The University of Queensland-sponsored Q150 Steam Train departed Ipswich in April, undertaking a five-month journey to more than 30 Queensland communities.

The heritage-listed Steam Train's trip is part of a year-long celebration of Queensland's 150th anniversary of becoming a state.

Ms Risson will board the train on its sector six travels through Queensland's west - including the towns of Mitchell, Warwick, Stanthorpe, Chinchilla, Roma, Dalby, Charleville and Toowoomba - where she intends to document, through the help of locals, the legacy of the iconic Greek caft.



In 2007, Ms Risson published a book about the Greek caft but is now working on a second publication that includes more Queensland establishments.

"My hope is that long-time residents and local councils and libraries, if they have old photographs of cafes, will get involved with the project as this second publication will celebrate and promote towns in western Queensland," she said.

"I expect to find that country Greek cafes have long gone, but in rural areas buildings may remain as a testament to this rich

and important aspect of our past.

"The Belle Vue Cafe in Warwick is one of the few still in operation, although no longer owned by Greek-Australians, but most, I expect, will be like the Paragon Caft in Dalby or the Red Rose Cafe in Mitchell, nothing but a distant memory."

Ms Risson said the Greek Cafe was a shared chapter in the histories of Greece and Australia, and was not only the social hub of its community, but enabled generations of Greek immigrants to establish themselves in their adopted homeland.

"People flocked to them because, in the days before refrigerators, supermarkets and processed foods, people purchased cold drinks, ice-creams and lollies at the local Greek cafe," she said.

"Our now-popular Mediterranean diet entered Australian life through the kitchens of Greek cafes where waitresses, who were local girls, first tasted yoghurt and olive oil, and across backyard fences where neighbours smelled the strange aromas of garlic and basil."

Black Dog ride shire stopover

FOUR weeks after his fourth child was born, Steve Andrews' mother took her life. That was more than 15 years ago, but Mr Andrews will always regret that he did not know of his mother's struggle with depression, often referred to as the Black Dog. He said she might still be alive if he and she, and family and friends, had known more about depression. His mother's suicide and that of a friend gave Mr Andrews the impetus for a 15,000-kilometre motorbike ride around Australia to raise awareness of depression. He set out from his home in Busselton, Western Australia, on Sunday, July 26, and hopes to be back there on August 20. Mr Andrews was in Cronulla last week, a third of the way through his journey, on which his only companion is his stuffed black toy dog Winston, named after Sir Winston Churchill, who called his depression his "black dog". The licensee of Northies Cronulla, Rob Stanley-Jones, presented Mr Andrews with a cheque for \$500 on behalf of Miranda Liquor Accord, an organisation that represents local licensed premises. Rydges Cronulla gave Mr Andrews free accommodation, and he was welcomed by Sutherland Shire-based counsellor Toni Langford, who stressed the need for people to be made aware of depression.