

On the road: Crete

On the wilder, western shores of this Greek island you'll find rustic mountain restaurants serving flaky slow-cooked lamb, wines that taste of blackberries and cherries, and farmers' markets full of wonderfully wonky veg

Words LUCY GILMORE

Just as I'm wondering what to rustle up for breakfast, sipping a strong coffee on the terrace, and gazing down over shimmering olive trees to Loutraki Bay, the doorbell chimes. I pad across the floor to the door. "There's more to Cretan cuisine than moussaka," George Koletsos, the owner of the modernist work of art masquerading as my villa, beams as he hands me a plate wrapped in tin foil. "Shepherd's pie – cooked by my wife," he adds. Not mince and mash but sfakian, flat pastry pancakes stuffed with mizithra, a crumbly white cheese, eaten hot and smeared with honey. As I tear off sweet, sticky, salty chunks, the silence broken by waves crashing on the beach below and the gentle jangle of goats' bells, the life of a Greek shepherd doesn't seem so hard.

Olea's striking stone and glass construction is the colour of burnt sand. It soars out of an olive grove, one of two villas set high above the sea (oleavillas.com). George has around 130 straggly olive trees – and three pristinely pruned into tidy round balls – and makes his own oil. The villa is a showstopper with cathedral-high ceilings, an infinity pool, hot tub, a barbecue and outdoor dining area – and a state-of-the-art kitchen, handy for the private chef on call, or if you fancy whipping up a feast after staggering back laden with fresh produce from nearby Chania's weekly farmers' market.

The original Cretan capital and, today, its second largest city, Chania is charmingly low-key, the old town's narrow streets tumbling down to a picturesque Venetian harbour. Its chequered history is still visible in its Minoan ruins, old city walls, Venetian lighthouse and Turkish quarter, but the harbour is now lined with fish restaurants and tavernas, while 16th-century Venetian townhouses, converted into chic boutique hotels such as **Serenissima**, hide down little backstreets (serenissima.gr).

The grand covered **market hall**, built in the shape of a cross at the beginning of the 20th century and modelled on the market in Marseilles, has butchers' stalls in one arcade, fishmongers in another and speciality food stores stocked with salted sardines, glistening olives and golden oils, cheeses and charcuterie (chaniamarket.com). It's open throughout the week, but on Saturdays there's also an open-air farmers' market nearby. »



Spilling down a long street snaking towards the sea, the stalls are three-deep with locals jostling to buy bundles of fresh thyme, rosemary and oregano, bunches of grapes, misshapen tomatoes, wonderfully wonky veg and local honey. As I meander through the throng, a farmer beckons me over, cuts a chunk of graviera (Crete's gruyère) for me to try and pours me a thimble-full of tsikoudia, the local firewater. It's a locavore's grazing menu in the sun.

The night before I had hit the harbour for supper. **Salis**, on the seafront, is more than a step up from your average taverna and takes pride in the provenance of its produce (*salischania.com*). At a table under the stars I'm presented with smoked amberjack fish tartare with caper leaves, sesame oil and rusk powder, followed by a beetroot salad with zingy green apple, quinoa and creamy yogurt served in a jar. The highlight, however, was the deconstructed pastitsio with truffle and graviera, maddeningly moreish, a powerfully pungent pasta dish, dark and salty with grated wild truffle topped with a hard crust of sheep's cheese. It was warm, aromatic and earthy.

This less-trampled corner of Crete, its wild west, is a far cry from the resort frenzy further east. But then Crete, in the southern Aegean, is the largest of the Greek islands, and the fifth biggest in the Mediterranean. It's easy to get away from the main tourist hotspots and veer off the beaten track. The mountainous interior here is riven with steep gorges, networked by nerve-jangling switchbacks and heart-stopping sheer drops, and dreadlocked goats wander dirt tracks and forgotten mountain villages hide gastronomic surprises – such as **Ntounias**, my next pitstop (*ntounias.gr*).

Chef and owner Stelios Trilyrakis once had a restaurant in Chania but retreated into the hills to set up the rather grand-sounding Gastronomy Centre of Cretan Diet in Drakona. The Cretan diet has been touted as the original healthy Mediterranean diet with its focus on fresh fruit and vegetables, beans, pulses and olive oil. His idea? To go back to the old ways of cooking, the traditional recipes, and to produce everything from the vegetables and herbs to the olive oil, wine and honey on his organic farm, orchard and vertiginous kitchen garden. Much of the food is cooked in clay pots on an open, wood-fired stove.

The outdoor terrace of his slow-food taverna is garlanded with tangled vegetation and has jaw-dropping views. I pull up a chair at a rickety wooden table in the sun and settle in as the dishes just keep coming, from

mounds of aubergine and feta to thick slabs of dark homemade bread and olive oil to lamb, falling off the bone, slow-cooked in baking paper. They might not be Instagram-pretty but they are mouth-watering.

The following day I'm learning more about Cretan cuisine from Valia Avgoustidi. She and her husband Yanis set up **Hand Picked Greece**, which offers artisan cookery workshops, wine seminars, beekeeping courses and olive-picking breaks from their home, The Olive Farm, in the little village of Litsarda (*handpickedgreece.com*).

I drop my bags on the way at the **Bleeverde Estate**, where two villas, sleek contemporary Levanda and more traditional honey-hued Elia, are also set in an olive grove on the outskirts of the picture-perfect village of Gavalochori (*bleeverde.com*). Both have sweeping views down to the sea, far below, and are just a short drive, cross-country, to The Olive Farm.

On the artily ramshackle smallholding, pecked by chickens and threaded, of course, with olive trees, Valia and Yanis have built an open-air terrace for their cookery courses, with a traditional brick oven and cheerily painted table and chairs where you all eat together after the classes.

As I wander down the path, Yanis is already stirring a huge pan of goat's milk for the cheese-making demo. "Every household used to make fresh cheese," Valia tells us, "but now it's a forgotten art." When the milk starts to boil he adds lemon to make it curdle. As we watch, we graze on chunks of graviera topped with delicious homemade pear chutney, sun-dried tomatoes and olives. Yanis strains the fresh cheese in muslin and sprinkles it with thyme, black pepper and salt.

For the hands-on class we are making a popular Cretan dish, spinach pie. "My grandmother would lay the filo pastry on pillows all over the house, teasing it out to make it really thin," Valia tells us. Kleftiko, a traditional meat and veg dish wrapped in baking paper and slow-cooked, is also on the menu. We douse mounds of marinated pork, waxy potatoes, onion, tomato, peppers, feta, garlic, oregano and thyme in olive oil and wine, tie the bundles up and shove them in the fire.

While they cook, Greek wine expert and author **Nico Manessis** joins us (*greekwineworld.gr*). Vine cultivation on Crete dates back four millennia, we learn, as we swirl and nose. Greek wine might not always have had the greatest reputation, but on Crete the diverse terroir, north-facing slopes cooled by Aegean winds, and a handful of innovative winemakers investing in modern technology is helping to turn things around. »

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PREVIOUS PAGE: A VIEW FROM VILLA ELIA ON THE BLEEVERDE ESTATE. ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT): MUSSELS AT SALIS; OCTOPUS CARPACCIO WITH WINE, CITRUS AND GRAVIERA AT SALIS; THE TERRACE AT NTOUNIAS RESTAURANT. OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) VALIA AVGOUSTIDI ROLLING PASTRY; LUNCH AT A HAND PICKED GREECE WORKSHOP; LOUTRAKI BAY; TOMATOES READY FOR CHANIA MARKET

PHOTOGRAPHS: LUCY GILMORE, ANDREAS MARKAKIS, ALAMY, AWL IMAGES



EXPLORE

What's more there are 11 indigenous grape varieties here.

First he introduces us to the vilana grape. The wine is floral and fresh. You can taste the limestone. Next is a vidiano, "the star of Crete's white grapes". A dry muscat smells sweet, of pure jasmine but is bone dry on the palate. The red he brings out is a syrah/mandilaria blend. "Mandilaria is the great grape of the southern Aegean." It also goes very well with kleftiko slow-cooked in an outdoor oven and eaten to a soundtrack of cicadas as the sun goes down.

The next morning Valia takes me to meet a local beekeeper, Giannis Sapounakis. He has 200 hives up in the mountains. Puffing smoke around the hive he scrapes off the propolis for us to smell its antibacterial properties. Later, sitting under a tree, he brings out a bottle of homemade raki flavoured with honey, cloves and cinnamon, a plate of graviera and a dish of treacly honey.

Inspired by Nico, I visit **Dourakis Winery** in the foothills of the White Mountains, a family affair with three hectares of its own grapes, the rest bought from locals (dourakiswinery.gr). Andreas Dourakis gives me a tour of the cellar, past 18,000 dust-caked bottles and huge oak barrels, then we sit outside for a tasting.

Lihnos is made from the vidiano grapes around the winery and smells of spring flowers. The Kudos Malvazia Aromatica is complex and golden with aromas of dried nuts and fruit. Moving on to the reds he pours a blend of Cretan kotsifali and syrah – a mouthful of blackberries and cherries.

"White wine is easy," he smiles, "but red wine is like a child – it needs time and care." To finish, Euphoria is its award-winning tawny dessert wine, a syrupy nectar with heady aromas of fig.

I'm sold – on Cretan wines, its producers and its gastronomy. George was right about the moussaka. Almost. Moussaka, Nico tells me, isn't actually Greek after all. It comes from Persia originally and was brought to Greece by the Turks.

HOW TO DO IT

Return flights from Gatwick to Chania start from £75 (easyjet.com). Prices at three-bedroom Olea Villas start at €360 per night for six people (oleavillas.com). Villa Levanda costs from €1,750 per week (bleverde.com). Cookery classes with Hand Picked Greece cost from €85 for a half-day workshop or €120 for a full-day workshop and market visit (handpickedgreece.com). For more information see visitgreece.gr and incrediblecrete.gr. Follow Lucy on Instagram and Twitter @lucygirlmore.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
A BEEKEEPER CHECKING
HIS HIVES; YOGURT, HONEY
AND POMEGRANATE FOR
BREAKFAST AT THE BLEVERDE
ESTATE; A SIDE STREET
IN CHANIA; OLIVES AND
SUN-DRIED TOMATOES AT
HAND PICKED GREECE; LUNCH
AT NTOUNIAS RESTAURANT;
FOOD AND DRINK AT
THE DOURAKIS WINERY;
OLEA VILLAS