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Santorini faces historic collapse in grape harvest as vineyards shrink and prices soar

Decades of neglect, climate change, and tourism threaten the future of the island’s renowned wine industry and heritage

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Santorini, one of the world’s most celebrated wine regions, is facing its worst grape harvest in living memory. This year, total production is expected to reach only 350 to 400 tons, a dramatic drop from the average of 2,500 to 3,000 tons seen over the past decade. In 2003, the island produced as much as 5,000 tons. The current situation has left vineyards nearly barren and winemakers struggling to secure enough grapes to continue their operations.

The roots of this crisis stretch back years. According to Stefanos Koundouras, professor of viticulture at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the decline is not sudden. He points to decades of neglect in vineyard management across Santorini. In areas like Akrotiri in the south, abandoned basket-trained vines are a common sight. Many have gone years without proper pruning or renewal. This lack of care left the ancient vines vulnerable when three consecutive years of drought and hail struck the island. Now, many vineyards yield just one or two baskets per stremma—about a quarter acre—a fraction of their former output.

The economic consequences are severe. Grape prices have soared from €0.85 per kilogram in 2010 to between €10 and €12 this year, with some predicting prices could reach €15. Since it takes about 1.4 kilograms of grapes to produce a single bottle of Santorini wine, producers are finding it increasingly difficult to compete internationally. The small average size of vineyard holdings—just five stremmata per grower—means that investment in improvements remains low. As a result, competition for what little fruit remains has become intense, with winemakers entering bidding wars that drive prices even higher.

Institutional challenges have compounded the problem. Petros Vamvakousis, president of the Santorini Winemakers Association, which currently includes ten of the island’s eighteen wineries, says that a lack of collective action and clear organization has left the sector vulnerable. Attempts at forming interprofessional unions have repeatedly failed over the past three decades, leaving growers and winemakers without a unified strategy or support system.

As grape growing became less profitable and more uncertain, many locals turned to other industries such as tourism and construction. Fertile vineyard land was sold off for development into villas and rental properties. This shift further reduced the area under vine and weakened the agricultural base that once supported Santorini’s wine industry.

Some winery owners believe that more direct investment in vineyards could have prevented today’s crisis. Matthaios Argyros, head of Estate Argyros and one of the island’s largest growers, criticizes wineries for relying too heavily on independent growers rather than cultivating their own fruit. He argues that if each winery had

invested in even 100 to 150 stremmata of vineyards, Santorini would not be facing such a severe shortage today. Instead, he says money has been wasted on bidding wars for grapes rather than on long-term support for growers or vineyard renewal programs.

The threat extends beyond economics and local livelihoods. Professor Koundouras warns that climate change is accelerating risks for Santorini's vineyards, which were already fragile due to their age and unique growing conditions. He emphasizes that responsibility is shared among winemakers, growers, scientists, and government officials—all of whom failed to act on warning signs over many years.

Desertification now poses an existential threat to Santorini's wine heritage. The total area under vine has shrunk from around 30,000 stremmata a few decades ago to just 10,000 today. If current trends continue unchecked, experts predict that only 5,000 stremmata may remain within five years. This would mean not only a loss in production but also a significant reduction in genetic diversity among local grape varieties such as Assyrtiko.

Some see hope in adapting vineyard practices for modern conditions—moving away from traditional basket training toward pruning methods that conserve water and increase yields—but warn that such changes must be managed carefully rather than imposed by crisis.

Despite these challenges, there is still some good news: while yields have collapsed, quality remains high for now. The extremely low yields are producing wines with remarkable intensity and concentration that showcase Assyrtiko's unique character and Santorini's volcanic terroir at its best. However, experts caution that continued environmental stress could soon threaten even this strength.

Santorini's wine industry stands at a crossroads. Its global reputation alone will not be enough to sustain it through ongoing environmental and economic pressures. Industry leaders say urgent action is needed—from replanting programs and better vineyard management to policies that balance tourism with agriculture—to ensure that Santorini's historic vineyards do not disappear entirely in the coming years.