

FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Hester Underhill REPORTING FROM *Crete*:

On the west side of Greece's biggest island, classic Cretan hospitality and cuisine is being revived and reinvented by a new wave of young and passionate producers, chefs and hosts. We prepared our palates and set off to sample their wares. PHOTOGRAPHER *Marco Arguello*

Stretching 260km from east to west, Crete is Greece's largest island. It's the country's most populous too, with some 620,000 residents, mostly in and around its capital city, Heraklion. Crete is hardly short on visitors – about five million come to the island every year – but as a destination that trades so heavily on its mythic past, ancient ruins and folkloric traditions, it isn't always easy for it to remain open to new ideas. In recent years, however, a crop of culinary entrepreneurs setting up or reviving family businesses has put a new spin on legendary Cretan hospitality. Many of these can be found in Crete's second city, Chania, and its spectacular surrounds on the lesser-explored western side of the island.

Over the course of a four-day roadtrip along the pristine coastline, through plunging gorges and lush valleys, and past soaring mountain peaks, MONOCLE paid a visit to some of these hoteliers, restaurateurs, winemakers and distillers to hear more about how they're updating the storied legacy of Cretan cuisine and navigating the tricky balance between heritage and invention.

DAY 1

Chania and Vlatos

An hour's flight across the Aegean takes us from Athens to Chania International Airport. Pint-sized Chania only has a population of 50,000 but it's well-connected, with an airport that serves 65 destinations in 27 countries across Europe and beyond. An hour's drive will take us to the westernmost tip of the island. We begin by following the coastline, before cutting inland to wend our way along a narrow road carved into the side of a gorge, passing small wooden



stalls flogging amber pots of honey harvested from the colourful wooden beehives that dot the island's rugged terrain.

Perched high on the slopes of a narrow valley is our home for the night: Milia Mountain Retreat. The hotel is made up of 15 compact guesthouses with sweeping views across craggy Topolia gorge. It was once a hamlet but had been abandoned for close to 40 years when friends Jacob Tsourounakis and Giorgos Makrakis decided to transform the little stone dwellings, some of which date back to medieval times, into an eco-retreat that opened its doors to visitors in 1993. Today it is known as more than just a scenic spot in which to lay your head, thanks to Makrakis's son Vasilis, who runs the hotel restaurant. He has helped Milia to become one of best restaurants on the island. Its menu that puts a refined touch on classics, including dishes such as orzo with a lemon-infused chestnut and mushroom ragout, and grilled goat pie with soft tiromalama sheep's cheese. Our meal takes place under glinting stars, which shine all the more brightly in this remote corner of the island, before we retire to bed in the cottages.

DAY 2
Chania to Rethymno

After breakfast we retrace the path back east for an hour towards Chania to reach Manousakis Winery. Guests here are greeted by Sokofreta, the floppy-eared rescue dog belonging to owners Alexandra Manousakis and Afshin Molavi, which bounds up to the car in excitement. Before we set foot inside the winery, we're bundled into the couple's 4x4 and up a precipitous dirt track leading to their 13 hectares of mountainside vineyards. "Western Crete is blessed with winds from mainland Europe that cool as they pass over the Mediterranean and collect a lot of humidity," says Molavi, looking out across the vista that stretches all the way to the coast. "This means that the mountains here get a lot of rainfall, so we're a lot greener than the rest of the island."

Manousakis was born in the US to a Greek father. In 2007, when she was in her early twenties, she decided to swap her life in Manhattan for Chania, leaving her job in property to manage the organic winery

Previous page
Plakias beach as seen from Merastri café

- This spread*
1. Cretan Aroma
 2. Metohi Kindelis
 3. One of Metohi Kindelis's apartments
 4. Alfresco lunch
 5. Danai Kindeli
 6. Manousakis Winery's 'tsikoudia'

owned by her father. Today she runs it with her Swedish-Iranian sommelier husband Molavi, producing 150,000 bottles a year using grape varietals including syrah and mourvèdre, as well as local Cretan grapes such as vidiano and romeiko.

Manousakis and Molavi also run sea-front restaurant Salis in Chania, as well as a brasserie, Maiami, that opened in 2021. After our visit to the vineyard, we drive 30 minutes east to reach Chania, where we rejoin the couple for a sunset glass of their dry grenache at Maiami before heading to Salis to eat. Molavi orders one of every dish and a steady flow of plates arrives at the table. Smoked tuna tartare is followed by ginger-infused octopus carpaccio. Then comes tuna belly with grape molasses, aubergine with a honey and miso dressing, and duck breast with beetroot risotto.



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1. Ammos Hotel in Chania
2. Ceramics by Alexandra Manousakis on sale at Maiami
3. Elena Toupoyannis
4. Tsikoudia distillery 35N
5. Farmers' market in Rethymno

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From here it's easy to reach Metohi Kindelis, a guesthouse surrounded by avocado orchards on the southern edge of Chania. Owner Danai Kindeli returned to her native Crete after a high-flying career working abroad in the political sphere. "I was travelling so much and working so hard that I was totally burnt out," says Kindeli. "So I came back to Crete to recover. I had no intention of staying." But when her uncle suggested that she try working with him at the family guesthouse, Kindeli decided to give it a shot. Twelve years have passed and today she's running the show. Her uncle retired five years ago and now spends his days managing the farmland surrounding the elegant, 16th-century property with its swooping stone arches and pink-hued walls.

DAY 3
Rethymno and Kapsaliana

Back in Chania we have breakfast at Red Jane bakery, opened in 2023 by hotelier Nikos Tsepelis in a former foundry from the 1930s. It stocks a range of confections created by Eyal Schwartz, co-owner of London's acclaimed E5 Bakehouse, such as croissants, cardamom buns and apple spandauers. Through tall windows behind the counter we see loaf upon loaf of fresh sourdough unloaded from the ovens. We tuck into a *koulouri* (bagel-shaped Greek bread coated in sesame seeds) stuffed with mizithra cheese and smoked salmon, alongside a flat white made using coffee from Red Jane's micro roastery next door.

Fully caffeinated, we take the coastal road east for an hour to reach the lively university town of Rethymno. On market days the place is alive with the brightly coloured awnings of stalls piled high with lemons, peaches and sun-warmed red peppers. For lunch there's Theorist, a café opened in 2023 by Giannis and Iakovos Kontarakis. The pair enlisted a friend, architect Eleftheria Pyroudi, to design the interiors, resulting in a well-judged whitewashed space with a hint of Scandi minimalism.

After lunch we take a 30-minute drive to Kapsaliana Village Hotel, heading along the coastal road for a while before cutting

inland to Kapsaliana in the heart of Crete's largest olive grove. The buildings housing the hotel date from 1763, when the nearby Arkadi monastery built an olive press on the site and small stone houses for workers began to spring up around it. But when the press closed in 1955, the village emptied. By the time architect Myron Toupoyannis came upon it in the 1970s, it was almost totally abandoned. He set about buying up and restoring the dwellings – a labour of love that continued for decades before the 22-key hotel finally opened in 2008.

Today, Toupoyannis's daughter Elena helps to oversee the family business. She returned to Crete in 2018 after three years in London and began adding her own touches to the hotel, including updating the branding and interiors, adding an open-air kitchen where guests can learn how to make Cretan dishes. She also worked with chef Nikos Thomas to create a menu for the restaurant, Elaia Bistronomie, which puts a contemporary spin on island classics. It's here that we pull up a chair for dinner, under the wandering branches of a lemon tree strung with garland lights. Paper-thin slivers of tomatoes from the hotel's vegetable patch are served with briny sea urchins and samphire for starters, followed by a rich, red mullet stifado stew with creamy potato purée and thin garlic crisps. A digestif of *tsipouro* (a punchy grape-distilled spirit) is the last thing we taste before bed.



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DAY 4
Rethymno and Sellia

After a breakfast of *lychnarakia* (sweet Cretan cheese pastries), we drive back to Rethymno. The first stop is 35N, a distillery on the outskirts of town that produces *tsikoudia*, a fiery grape spirit that has been enjoyed by islanders since the early days of the Ottoman occupation. The business was founded in 2019 by three friends who decided to turn co-founder Elias Melissourgos's decades-long hobby of distilling into a brand named after the circle of latitude that runs through Crete. Our guide takes us in precise, mechanical detail through the functions of the towering copper distilling tanks that fill the space. They're heated, he says, using steam produced by burning the pits of olives that are the waste products of the island's oil mills.

Next we continue west but cut back inland for 20 minutes for lunch at Alekos. The taverna, in the small village of Armeni, is run by Sifis Fragiadakis, whose grandfather opened it in 1932. There's no menu here; dishes are served meze-style according to what produce is available at the market that morning. The only thing our waitress wants to know is whether we want snails. We accept and are presented with a bowl of *hochlioi bourbouristi*, a Cretan delicacy made by steeping snails in an aromatic broth infused with garlic, rosemary and bay leaf.

Our journey takes us south along roads lined with eucalyptus and fig trees until we reach Cretan Aroma. Visitors can stroll along rows of echinacea, rosemary and thyme. There are also organic herbs such as dittany and malotira, which are native to Crete and dried to make tea. The island boasts one of the longest life expectancies in Europe and many Cretans believe that these infusions are the secret to their longevity.

The route takes us through a narrow gorge that opens suddenly to spectacular views across the turquoise waters of the Libyan Sea. At the mountain village of Sellia, we meet Eva Papadaki, who's sitting on the terrace of a café named Merastri. Behind her are plunging views down to the white-sand bay below. Papadaki was born and raised in the village but today lives in Athens, where she runs a photographic agency called IOAM, as well as creative



1. Theorist café in Rethymno
2. Fried snails are a Cretan delicacy
3. Rows of herbs at Cretan Aroma
4. Enjoying the early evening sun at Ammos Hotel
5. Lobby at Ammos Hotel



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space IOAM Lofts. She's about to add a new string to her bow with the launch of IOAM Apotheke, a collection of homeware and culinary products. She's back on the island to spend time with her family and search for suppliers, having identified producers for olive oil, thyme honey and ceramics near Rethymno. Papadaki is keen to explain the ever-stronger pull of Cretan cuisine and that of the island's rugged west. "Simple ingredients mark our profound respect for tradition," she says, as we tuck into sticky orange pie and ice cream. "Food here is a celebration of life and longevity. And in Crete, it's not only the quality that makes the food taste so good. It's because it's always shared."

We retrace our footsteps west back to Chania, where we spend the night at beachfront hotel Ammos. Nikos Tsepelis' stylish, 33-key guesthouse faces out over the golden sands of Agii Apostoli beach and is decorated with furnishings from the likes of Muller van Severen and Objects of Common Interest. We're treated to more pastries from Red Jane Bakery for breakfast the next morning before we take a cab to the airport to catch our flight home. — (M)

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