Vassilis Ballas and his wife, Roula Boura, extract resin from a mastic tree on Chios. The year-round process of mastic cultivation has changed little since antiquity.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EIRINI VOURLOUMIS, THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

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**Since antiquity, Chios has drawn visitors with its prized, aromatic resin.**

3 MINUTE READ

BY MARGARITA GOKUN SILVER

WALK PYRGI’S NARROW, medieval streets and you’ll see buildings, arches—even the undersides of balconies—etched with intricate, black-on-white, geometric patterns. Strings of cherry tomatoes and drying peppers sway above women who comb through leafy twigs with the concentration of diamond hunters. They’re searching for blobs of hardened white goo: mastic, the natural resin prized since antiquity for its aromatic and healing properties.

Women pick mastic drops outside their homes in Pyrgi. The buildings are decorated with [xysta](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40248541?seq=1" \l "page_scan_tab_contents" \t "_blank), the traditional, geometric, black-and-white patterns that date back centuries.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGIOS MAKKAS, ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Pyrgi is one of 24 mastic-producing villages, or *mastichochoria*, on the [Greek](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/destinations/europe/greece/) island of [Chios](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chios-island-Greece). Although the mastictree (*Pistacia lentiscus)* is ubiquitous throughout the Mediterranean, the variety that weeps [mastic resin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/mastic) grows only on the southern part of Chios—a quirk of nature that led to the island’s rich, twisting history.

The gum monopolies

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For millennia, *mastiha*(mastic) has been the fame, economic force, and source of identity for Chios and its inhabitants. Herodotus mentioned it back in the fifth century B.C., the Romans chewed it to clean their teeth and freshen their breath, and the Ottomans exalted it as a spice.

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Its cultivation in earnest began with the 14th-century arrival of the Genoese, who monopolized the mastic trade and built the mastichochoria with fortress-like wall-to-wall houses, a maze of streets to fool raiders, and a central watchtower to signal attacks. To prevent illegal trading, they instituted night curfews for villagers and severe punishments for stealing mastic.

Mastic is known in Greece as the “tears of Chios” for the transparent beads of resin that harden and darken over time. Bitter at first, the flavor becomes piny and herbal the longer you chew.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AGE FOTOSTOCK, ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

When the Ottomans took over in the 16th century, they kept the monopoly. Only in 1840 were mastic producers finally allowed to trade independently what they’d cultivated, and less than a century later they joined forces to create the Chios Mastiha Growers Association (CMGA), a cooperative active to this day.

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Regime changes notwithstanding, mastic cultivation and production have remained largely the same over the centuries. Still centered around the 24 villages, it’s a year-round affair that begins with tending to the soil, continues with making shallow cuts in the bark for the mastic to seep from, and culminates with harvest and cleaning. Most of this process is done by hand. Like generations before them, today’s producers often call upon families and neighbors to help.

How to visit

Though geographically closer to [Turkey](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/destinations/asia/turkey/) than to Greece, Chios is a short flight east from Athens on [Olympic Air](https://www.olympicair.com/en). Or hop on the overnight [ferry](https://www.ferryhopper.com/) from Piraeus to Chios town.