



CHIOS, Greece — Nikos Gavalas and Alexandra Tricha, both 31 and trained as agriculturalists, were frustrated working on poorly paying, short-term contracts in Athens, where jobs are scarce and the cost of living is high. So last year, they decided to start a new project: growing edible snails for export.

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Eirini Vourloumis for The New York Times

Nikos Gavalas and Alexandra Tricha tended to their snail farm in Chios, Greece.

As Greece's blighted economy plunges further into the abyss, the couple are joining with an exodus of Greeks who are fleeing to the countryside and looking to the nation's rich rural past as a guide to the future. They acknowledge that it is a peculiar undertaking, with more manual labor than they, as college graduates, ever imagined doing. But in a country starved by austerity even as it teeters on the brink of default, it seemed as good a gamble as any.

Mr. Gavalas and Ms. Tricha chose to move back to his native Chios, an Aegean island closer to Izmir, Turkey, than to Athens. They set up their boutique farm using \$50,000 from their families' life savings. That investment has yet to pay off; they will have their first harvest later this year. But the couple are confident about their decision.

"When I call my friends and relatives in Athens, they tell me there's no hope, everything is going from bad to worse," Ms. Tricha said on a recent afternoon, as she walked through her greenhouse, where thousands of snails lumbered along on rows of damp wooden boards. "So I think our choice was good."

Unemployment in Greece is now 18 percent, rising to 35 percent for young people between the ages of 15 and 29 — up from 12 percent and 24 percent, respectively, in late 2010. But the agricultural sector has been one of the few to show gains since the crisis hit, adding 32,000 jobs between 2008 and 2010 — most of them taken by Greeks, not migrant workers from abroad, according to a study released this fall by the Pan-Hellenic Confederation of Agricultural Associations.

"The biggest increase is in middle-aged people between 45 and 65 years old," said Yannis Tsiforos, the director of the confederation. "This shows us that they had a different sort of employment in the past."

In Greece, as elsewhere in the Mediterranean, most families have traditionally invested heavily in real estate and land, which are seen as far more stable than financial investments, and it is common for even low-income Greeks to have inherited family property. Increasingly, as the hard times bite deeper, many Greeks are deciding or being forced to fall back on that last line of defense.

Enrollment in agricultural schools is also on the rise. Panos Kanellis, the president of the American Farm School in Salonika, which was founded in 1904 and offers kindergarten through high school as well as continuing education in sustainable agriculture, said applications tripled in the past two years and enrollment in classes like cheesemaking and winemaking has been rising.

Mr. Kanellis says that young people frequently come to him and say: "I have two acres from my grandfather in such-and-such a place. Can I do something with it?"

A growing number of Greeks are asking themselves that question, and some are deciding they can. "I think a lot of people will do this," Ms. Tricha said. "In big cities, there's no future for them. For young people, the only choice is for them to go to the countryside or to go abroad."

If the refugees from the cities are expecting an easy or idyllic existence in the countryside, they are quickly disabused of such notions. In 2006, Vassilis Ballas and his wife, Roula Boura, both 36, left their jobs in Athens, where he worked in content management at a Web site and she in marketing, to move to Chios, where his grandparents were from.

That was before the financial crisis, but they wanted a change and decided to try their luck cultivating mastic trees, which grow only in southern Chios and produce an aniselike resin that is harvested and crystallized to produce mastic liquor, foodstuffs, candles and soap.

“It was a personal decision,” Mr. Ballas said. “We were thinking of moving out of Athens, and a friend told us, ‘My grandmother produces 100 kilos of mastic going out on her own with a donkey,’ ” or about 220 pounds, Mr. Ballas recalled, a crop for which a producer can earn around \$40 a pound wholesale. But the couple found that mastic cultivation was much more difficult than they supposed. So while they still have 400 mastic trees, they have broadened into mastic-related ecotourism to make ends meet.

Such undertakings — which on Chios includes a fledgling wine cooperative, Ariousios, which is working to resuscitate an ancient grape varietal, Chiotiko krassero — indicate that there is money to be made in agriculture and tourism.

Some young Greeks are returning not to the land but to the sea, joining another venerable Greek industry. Since 2008, the number of applications to maritime schools across Greece has quadrupled to nearly 7,000, according to the Naval Ministry.

Yannis Menis, 27, a Chios native, said he had a promising career ahead of him as a nuclear physicist. But just shy of his Ph.D., he could not afford to continue his studies and decided to follow in his father’s footsteps as a ship engineer, responsible for ship maintenance.

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