

wine talk

Tzora Vineyards at the Judean Hills



The master vigneron

Eran Pick is the first Israeli to join the distinguished elite group of Masters of Wine

By ADAM MONTEFIORE

Ring the bell! Israel now has its first-ever Master of Wine and it is a truly amazing achievement. There are only 129 living MWs in the world from outside the United Kingdom and there are only four from the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Our own Eran Pick has now joined this distinguished elite.

A Master of Wine is part of the most prestigious wine community in the world. Anyone who has the letters MW after his name commands instant respect.

Think how many wine professionals there are that we all look up to, whether winemakers, critics, buyers or wine educators. Well, out of all those respected, talented people, there is only one in Israel who is entitled to truthfully refer to himself as an MW.

I have been many years in this business, but always hold the MWs in enormous respect, even a little awe. I never thought I would see the day when we would have an Israeli MW, and thought it even more unlikely that a winemaker would have the time and the exposure to wines other than their own to succeed.

Make no mistake, it is a phenomenal achievement, but Pick is a phenomenon.

He is a father of three young children, and winemaker of Tzora Vineyards, which he

combines with being CEO of the winery. He is also a winemaker who makes wine in the vineyards. As such he is a wine grower, beautifully described by the French word *vigneron*.

The grower's world is the size of his vineyard. He is intimate with his vines. His focus may be on an individual vine or a particular bunch of grapes. The world is his vineyard and the vines are his children. He meticulously plans what each vine is going to be when it grows up. The grower will nurture, cajole and encourage that vine to be the best bottle of wine that there can be.

Then the winemaker, part artist, part scientist, receives the precious fruit, which he will endeavor to transform into a fine-quality, authentic wine, which reflects the special and unique terroir and character of his vines.

To be a CEO requires a breadth of vision. You need to manage and be a strategist, and the wine grower and winemaker don't always get their way.

I am not sure whether it is easier or more difficult when these tasks are all handled by one person. How does Pick find the time to do all this, look after his young family and study to be an MW? Obviously he has 30 hours in his day, when most of us make do with 24!

Pick was born in Kfar Saba, and lives in



Eran Pick

Tel Aviv. He had always wanted to be an architect, but a bottle of German Riesling from the Moselle Valley opened a window in his mind.

He started off like so many with a wine appreciation course with Barry Saslove, and a growing interest in wine encouraged a change of direction. He completed his BS degree in viticulture and enology with highest honors at the University of California at Davis. He traveled, with ears and eyes open, to work in Barossa, Bordeaux, Napa and Sonoma. He joined Tzora Vineyards in 2006.

He is tall and quietly modest, with a

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slightly old-world English charm about him. His humor is very British, too – subtle, dry, not picked up by everyone.

THE WORLD of wine is mourning the premature death of Paul Pontallier, the winemaker of Château Margaux.

One of my proudest moments in wine was representing the Golan Heights Winery at the New York Wine Experience in 1999. This was the first time an Israeli winery was ever invited to the most exclusive wine event in the world.

I stood alone representing Israel. I looked around and saw only famous wineries. Virtually next to me was Pontallier himself, pouring the wines of Château Margaux. I felt I had intruded into a private symposium (Greek wine tasting) for the wine gods.

Pontallier, who will be sadly missed, was a role model. Quite apart from what he achieved, I am thinking more of his character: the self-sufficiency, the quiet modesty, the steely, inner self-confidence that was not always visible to the outsider. The perfectionism, the curiosity, the ability to take calculated risks. The absolute professionalism. Paul Bascaules, his assistant, was quoted as saying: "What I learnt from him was doubt and humility. He said many times if you don't doubt, you don't learn."

Pontallier's death was announced when I was writing this article, and I make no

apology that this is an article about Pick. I don't want to diminish Pontallier's memory in any way, and Pick is at an earlier stage in his winemaking career, but it suddenly occurred to me that in trying to describe Pick, I came up with these exact same phrases. I can pay Pick no higher compliment.

Pick is quiet, a listener, who believes in his way but soaks up information and is not afraid of taking risks. He is fascinated by all stages of winemaking. The building blocks and the process interest him as much as the final result.

Caro Maurer, MW, pointed out that from the first moment "his [Pick's] talent, his dedication, his ambition" were obvious, but she went on: "...but... it was his sincerity which made him stand out. I assume it was a result of weighing self-doubts and self-confidence."

I am always writing that wine is a product of a person and place. This is never truer than of Tzora Vineyards. The winery was founded in 1993 by the much-loved kibbutz member Ronnie James. He was a self-taught grower who tended vines. He wanted to create a winery rather than selling his precious grapes to the large wineries. He was a man of the soil, salt of the earth, with a warm smile, a ready laugh and an engaging personality. Probably the opposite of Pick, apart from one characteristic: he was determined to explore the terroir of his vineyards.

James was a pioneer of the idea of wine being representative of place. His worldview and character gained many friends throughout Israel. He was not to know that arguably his most inspired decision was bringing Pick to be the winemaker in 2006, and when James sadly died, Pick took over.

The winery has since gone onward and upwards making high-quality wines that reflect the specific terroir. The names of the wines give the game away: Judean Hills – the region, Shoresh – the vineyard, and Misty Hills – a plot in the vineyard. It is all about place.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Tzora is at the same time one of the fastest-improving wineries in Israel as well as being one of the finest wineries in Israel.

The team is professional as can be. Dor James, son of Ronnie, is fittingly the valued vineyard manager, and the icon Jean-Claude Berrouet, of Petrus fame, is consultant. However, Eran Pick, MW, the master vigneron, is in charge. He is the conductor and plays the lead instruments.

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The Tzora wines I tasted were as follows:

Judean Hills Blanc 2014

A blend of mainly Chardonnay and a little Sauvignon Blanc. The nose is more Chardonnay and the Sauvignon comes through in the mouth and finish. The wine has a creamy tropical fruit nose, a pleasing fatness and flavor in the mouth cut by the excellent acidity. NIS 100

Judean Hills Red 2014

This is a best buy. Always performs. Made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Merlot. The nose is slightly rustic, with red fruits to the fore. There is a touch of leather on the palate, a sour red fruit finish, and the wine is beautifully balanced. Flavorful and refreshing, yet restrained. A great food wine. NIS 100

Shoresh Blanc 2014

The only varietal in the Tzora portfolio. It is made from Sauvignon Blanc. Many

Israeli sauvignons flatter to deceive with a dancing nose and lack of substance in the mouth. This wine is the opposite. There are aromas of tropical fruit, citrus flowers with a flinty, mineral mouth feel and the aromas last all the way to the long finish. NIS 140

Shoresh 2014

A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Petit Verdot. It has a combination of black fruit and spice with a hint of greenness, soft tannins and good acidity, giving the wine a long balanced finish. It has good structure. It is still a baby and needs a little more bottle age. NIS 140

Misty Hills 2013

Misty Hills is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah grown in a particular plot sometimes shrouded in mists. Hence the name. I love the weight and grip of this wine. It has great up-front fruit, deli-

cate not jammy, with spicy and herbal notes, well-integrated oak flavors and an almost refreshing finish. Elegant, showing depth and finesse. NIS 240

There is also a dessert wine called Or made from Gewurztraminer. It is an extremely limited production. Very well regarded, but I have not tasted it. It is on my list....

