

# Tranquility beyond the Green Line

'Cremisan Winery has a permanence that outlives the shallowness of daily politics'



A CREMISAN vineyard and the Cremisan Winery near Beit Jala. The winery used to be frequented by Israeli wine-lovers. Today these kinds of visits are a rarer occurrence. (Courtesy)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

I set off for Cremisan Winery full of curiosity. After all, this was the winery that first decided to focus on the land's indigenous grape varieties. Maybe they do not have the nobility of Cabernet Sauvignon, but they do exist and this is news to many wine lovers in Israel.

Secondly I was mindful of the long history. Flash-back to the end of the 19th century when there were very few wineries in Israel. There was the large Carmel Mizrahi, the first commercial winery, Shor and Teperberg, two domestic wineries in the Old City of Jerusalem, producing mainly kiddush wines, Friedman in Petah Tikva and Mikve Israel. Then there were the Christian-owned wineries, one in Saronia owned by the Templers, and the two monasteries, Latrun and Cremisan.

Cremisan is therefore part of our wine-making heritage. I always believe we should take time to learn more from the wine-producing countries around us. I include countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as Lebanon, Cyprus, Turkey and Greece. Even Syria has a winery which is ranked by some to be superior to any Israeli winery. We should be very humble, look around and learn what we can. We should also learn from

those from within who are different. Only then we can really understand about ourselves and our terroir.

We should not forget the crucial role played by monasteries during the Dark and Middle Ages. They kept the wine trade alive and also staked out the future quality wine regions of Europe. Today's wine industry ought to thank the Church, both for its survival and focus on quality. It is interesting also that the Catholic Church not only needed the beverage for its ritual, but also appreciated good food and wine. Think of the great cuisines of Europe: What do they have in common? The countries are all predominately Catholic.

I navigated through the Christian town of Beit Jala, found with difficulty the imposing monastery and then drove down to the winery. It suddenly occurred to me how Christians in our area are an endangered species.

The Cremisan Monastery was founded by Father Antonio Belloni, an Italian Catholic monk, in 1885. The name of the monastery comes from "Kerem Zan," "the vineyard of Zan." The monastery belongs to the Italian Salesian Order. It is situated on the northern slopes of Mount Gilo, northwest of Beit Jala. It is 5 km. from Bethlehem and 12 km. from Jerusalem. The monastery made wine to finance Father Belloni's social activities to help poor children in the Holy Land and to provide

a livelihood for local families.

The most striking thing are the gorgeous terraced vineyards and olive groves in the shadow of the monastery and winery. Vines vie with olive trees to showcase those two most stubborn and permanent products of our region. Whether you call it Israel, Palestine or the Holy Land and talk about biblical times or today, the products are the same: wine and olive oil.

In fact, remains found in the vicinity of Cremisan show the existence of human inhabitation back in the Bronze Age. Ancient terraces, and old wine and olive presses provide evidence of agriculture from the same period.

For years, Cremisan made wine to satisfy the needs of the Catholic Church and their own communities. When I first came to Israel, the wines were available only in export markets. Once I visited Aqaba in Jordan, saw the wines and purchased them there out of curiosity. Later I remember finding them in the Christian Arab-owned liquor stores in Jaffa. They were also sold to regional monasteries. In those days, their better known wines were a rustic red called David's Tower, the well-known Messa, a communion wine and their Marsala dessert wine.

Until the middle of the 1980s, many Israelis were visitors at Cremisan Winery and tasted wines from the monastery. These days, because of border complica-





**RICCARDO COTARELLA**, one of Italy's most famous winemakers, became the winery's consultant. (Courtesy)

#### Cremisan Dabouki 2015

Dabouki is the most planted white variety in the Palestinian vineyards. It is also planted in Israel, where in the past it was used for distillation for brandy or arak. The wine has soft tropical fruit aromas, a fat mouth feel and a broad finish.

Price: NIS 50 to NIS 55

#### Cremisan Hamdani Jandali 2015

This is a nice wine made with two Palestinian varieties. The wine has tropical notes, lined with grapefruit and lime. It has reasonably good acidity with a refreshing finish.

Price: NIS 50 to NIS 55

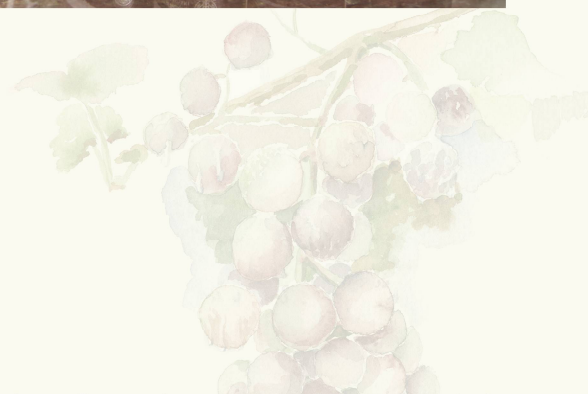
#### Cremisan Baladi 2013

A light red wine with prominent acidity. More cranberry or pomegranate than blackcurrant. Not as good than the whites, but better on my second tasting. It should be served chilled.

Price: NIS 50 to NIS 55

#### Cremisan Brandy

I had to make do with a brief sniff from a cask, but the nose was rich, warm with a dried fruit aroma. When they bottle their brandy, aged over decades, it will be well worth a special purchase. (No price yet.)



tions, visits are rarer. However I found it a fascinating and beautiful place to visit. Those seeking the wines without making the trek to Beit Jala can purchase them at the monastery of Beit Jimal, in the Jerusalem Hills, south of Beit Shemesh.

For 40 years, the monastery's winemaker was Father Lamon, an Italian monk, who began making the wine in 1968. In 2008, a new project was started with Italian assistance to study and improve native grape varieties. New equipment, advanced technology and imported expertise of an Italian winemaker and agronomist all combined to rejuvenate the Cremisan Winery. Its spacious winery now combines the new and old under one roof. The new wines were launched originally at Vinitaly wine competition in Verona, Italy, and later at the Sommelier Exhibition in Tel Aviv.

A young Italian winemaker was employed and two young Palestinians were sent to Italy to study viticulture and wine making. Most significantly, one of Italy's most famous winemakers, the legendary Riccardo Cotarella, became the wine-making consultant. He is a giant of wine making and one of the most famous wine consultants worldwide.

Most of vineyards in the Palestinian area are in the Hebron region. Approaching Hebron is like being in Spain. There seem to be vineyards everywhere; however, most grapes are used for table grapes or raisins,

or are made into jam or a grape syrup. Leaves are also a precious commodity, used to produce a dish also prominent elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean, stuffed vine leaves.

The monastery uses grapes from three vineyards. The first is in the Bethlehem area including around the monastery itself. This vineyard was the source of grapes for many years. In 1968, after the Six Day War, they also used grapes from Beit Jimal. They also buy grapes from Deir Rafat and Hebron. Recently they decided to focus more on their unique local indigenous varieties. They studied the varieties, made a short list of those with the best potential and ended up working with Baladi Asmar, Dabouki, Hamdani and Jandali grapes.

However, Cremisan Winery isn't the first winery to work with indigenous grapes. Ariel University and Hebron University have both researched the potential of these indigenous grape varieties, and the work is ongoing.

Their new wines appear under the stylish Star of Bethlehem label. Creating particular interest is the Hamdani Jandali white blend. It finished first in a tasting of Israeli and regional white wines conducted by the famous wine critic Jancis Robinson. It has since reached the finest restaurants in Tel Aviv and exports have increased. Last month it received 90 points in the *Wine Spectator*.

For years the management of the winery was in the hands of the priests. Today the qualification is professionalism. The winemaker and agronomist is Fadi Batarseh, who never drank wine when he was younger, but decided he wanted to study something different. He went to the trouble of learning Italian so he could study in Italy. He wrote his thesis on the indigenous varieties, also worked in Italy in the Trentino and Orvieto regions, including at Cotarella's Falesco Winery. He returned in 2012. The executive director of the winery is Ziad Giorgio Bitar, who is young, dynamic and efficient. Together the new team has brought Cremisan Winery into the 21st century.

Cremisan Winery has a permanence that outlives the shallowness of daily politics. It plays an important pioneering role in our wine industry and whether its buildings end up in Israel or Palestine is not the issue. No doubt it is important for them, but one thing I do know. They will continue to be an oasis of tranquility in our stormy waters, and anyone truly interested in wine or with the slightest bit of curiosity, should add them to their list of wines to taste and places to visit.

*Adam Montefiore has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is known as "the ambassador of Israeli wine" and the 'English voice of Israeli wine'."*