



A friendly glass of wine

THE KING DAVID Wine Bar: If you want to quaff an Alexander Blonde or Herzl Dolce De Asal or nose and sip the Pelter Gin or Julius VI Brandy, you can.



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

I recently met Haim Spiegel, director of food and beverage procurement at Dan Hotels, one of the stalwarts of the Israeli hotel industry.

These days F&B managers in Israeli hotels seem younger, and the job itself has changed with time. It seems to be more of a firefighting role than it used to be. F&B managers can often be seen rushing from crisis to crisis wielding big bunches of keys, trying to keep the show on the road. Moreover, the position today seems to be just a stepping stone up the greasy ladder; today F&B, tomorrow Front of House. Old-school F&B managers, equally at home in kitchen and wine cellar, with a lifetime's experience in the field, are not only rare but a threatened species.

I say this not to denigrate a whole new generation of F&B enthusiasts but by way of introduction to Haim Spiegel. We met in a café, but as always he was dressed immaculately. If you saw him at the Old Bailey Law Courts he would not seem out of place. I have known him for over 25 years, and during that entire time he has been the address for all things food and beverage in Dan Hotels, setting and maintaining the standards for hotels all over the country. I sometimes feel he is the F&B manager for the entire country, for he is a true

master of his craft.

Spiegel is stylish in all he does. An absolute perfectionist, he is the ultimate foodie, immersed in the history and folklore of gastronomy, yet up to the minute – and into the future – regarding the latest trends. He is soft-spoken but misses nothing, rather like the wise owl in children's books. He does not raise his voice to draw attention to himself, and when he does speak it is normally brief, pithy, smart and of value. In other words, worth waiting for.

He is pretty sharp on wines, too, and has played his part in advancing Israeli wines in the global market. Not for nothing is he invited year after year to play a crucial part in the annual Eshkol Hazahav (Golden Cluster) wine competition, organized by Studio Ben Ami – the Oscars of Israeli wine. Spiegel oversees the tasting and the competition to ensure it adheres to the highest moral and professional standards, and then presents the awards. He is seen as a credible figure in the wine industry, being totally above-board and free of conflicts of interest.

Normally, as people become older, or have been around in a job for a while, they tend to become more conservative. Furthermore, the hotel world in general can be as conservative as it gets. So I was surprised, delighted and excited to hear Spiegel's views on wine service, and about his campaign to advance the acces-

sibility, service and sale of wine in Dan Hotels.

The concept is to create what Spiegel calls "Wine friendly hotels." The King David Hotel is the first, and others such as Dan Tel Aviv, Dan Accadia and Dan Carmel may be next on the agenda. Of course, the King David is the most famous hotel in Israel and known throughout the world for its rich history.

This pioneering idea was dreamed up and is being implemented by Spiegel. He realizes wine is Israel's best ambassador. Today we are more known for hi-tech – but you can't give a bottle of hi-tech as a present. He appreciates that a bottle of wine can be a prohibitive item to purchase. It can be expensive and many people do not want to drink a whole bottle. So he believes that the future is serving wine by the glass.

The focus is on variety, attractive prices and accessibility, with helpful, knowledgeable staff. The grand Oriental Bar of the King David Hotel has been relaunched as a wine bar. Wines are carefully chosen to show the finest of Israel at every price point. A number of wines are made available by the glass at attractive prices. A EuroCave dispenser is used to ensure quality is maintained. You don't have that awful feeling of buying a glass without knowing how long the bottle has been open or how it has been kept.

You can purchase by the glass, or in a most praiseworthy innovation, buy smaller glasses in flights of

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HAIM SPIEGEL, director of food and beverage procurement at Dan Hotels.

DANIEL GIDEY, the King David's sommelier, made aliya from Ethiopia.

two, three or four wines to sample one against the other or simply to broaden the tasting experience.

Prices by the glass range from NIS 30 to NIS 54 – unheard-of in most hotels. The wines by the glass in the King David's Wine Bar are divided into two categories. First, the "Classics": Carmel Kayoumi Riesling, C Blanc du Castel, Maia Mare Nostrum and the Flam Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve. Then there are wines of the month, which currently include the Binyamina Unoaked Chardonnay, the Kishor Savant Riesling, Montefiore Cabernet Sauvignon and Recanati Wild Carignan. The range is chosen to be of interest to the wine expert and to educate the curious. In the other food and beverage areas there are a further six wines by the glass, making 14 in all.

The King David Wine Bar champions not only Israeli wines but also Israeli beers and spirits. The hotel lists beers from the Alexander and Herzl boutique breweries and also spirits from the Pelter and Julius artisan distilleries. So if you want to quaff an Alexander Blonde or Herzl Dolce De Asal or nose and sip the Pelter Gin or Julius VI Brandy, you can. The bar menu, carefully chosen by celebrated chef David Biton, offers a few snacks to compliment but not dominate the wines.

Then comes the product knowledge aspect. The hotel has appointed a sommelier, who has grown in the

job and is learning and developing his knowledge day by day. I met him dressed in a spotless white tuxedo. After all, this is the King David!

His name is Daniel Gidey. He made aliya from Ethiopia in 1986 on his own, leaving his family behind. He had learned to speak English and so was immediately drawn to a life in the hotel business. He started working for Isrotel at 18 and spent his time as a bartender and waiter. He took the bar courses and got his F&B diploma at Hadassah College and ended up assistant manager of La Regence, the King David's prestige restaurant. Today he has climbed his own greasy ladder to become the first sommelier of a hotel in Dan Hotels' Wine Friendly Hotel program.

He is backed by a good support team, hand-picked by Spiegel. Gal Zohar, an international sommelier, wine consultant and author of *The New Israeli Wine Guide* is the consultant who helped select the wines, develop the concept and train the staff. He is the leading light of the next generation of Israeli wine experts. The F&B manager, Elie Fischer, who hails from Paris, has been imported for his experience, expertise and dynamic, youthful approach to service.

The bar is open from 5 p.m. until 12:30 a.m. In addition to hotel patrons, the wine bar is pleased to encourage walk-ins. This represents a marvelous oppor-

tunity to sample the Middle Eastern grandeur of one of the world's great hotels without having to take out a second mortgage.

We in the wine trade have spent a lifetime building ivory towers of expertise usually closed to the average Joe (or Ya'acov). We have made wine exclusive. If you can't give fluent tasting descriptions containing baskets of fruit, you don't belong and cannot be part of the club. This is fundamentally wrong and it is important to rip up the pretension and take the lead in making wine more accessible. There are many progressive outlets, but what makes the King David initiative especially interesting is that it is the King David and Dan Hotels, which would normally be a byword for formality in wine service.

King David, the man, employed someone to look after his vineyards and another person to look after his wine. These were perhaps the first Jewish viticulturist and sommelier. How appropriate it is that King David, the hotel, is bringing wine sales in a formal setting into the 21st century. One looks forward to more hotels joining the pioneering Wine Friendly Hotel program. ■

The author 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."