

Keep it in the family

Beyond their award-winning high-quality wines, leading winemakers carry on time-honored traditions in the production of beloved grape juices and kiddush wines

A FAMILY in Kibbutz Misgav Am, in the North, during a kiddush. (Illustrative: File photo/Reuters)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

When all the talk is of quality Israeli wines that win prizes worldwide, you will be surprised at how much grape juice and kiddush wine is still being produced these days.

Israel produces approximately 50 million bottles a year from wine grapes. However, a surprising 10 million bottles of this is grape juice. These are grape juices usually made from wine grapes, marketed in glass bottles and sold on the wine shelves in Israeli supermarkets. I say “wine grapes” because once wine was made from wine grapes (Cabernet, Merlot, etc.) and grape juice was made from food or table grapes, but these days there are enough wine grapes to spare. Producing grape juice is a great way of using excess grapes.

Grape juice really came in its own with the anti-alcohol movement of the 20th century that spawned Prohibition in America. The temperance movement was convinced that partaking of alcohol, including wine, was a sin. Many thought that whenever the word *tirosh* was used in the Bible it referred to grape juice and not new wine. It was an interpretation based on wishful thinking. Grape juice is but a short stepping stone on the way to wine and then wine

vinegar. Certainly in biblical times they did not have the techniques to preserve grape juice. Once grapes are harvested, all they want to do is ferment. There are yeasts on the skin of the grapes and in the air that can't wait to start fermentation. Just try and stop them. Making wine was then a way of saving the product. Leaving it as grape juice would have been impossible.

Of course, when pasteurization was invented by Louis Pasteur, an American clergyman named Thomas Branwell Welch adapted the techniques to allow him to produce a commercially stable grape juice and a new market was born. Today, the giant of kosher grape juice in America is Kedem. It started to make its grape juice in the 1950s, often using the Concord grape, so beloved by the American palate. Its grape juice has remained the choice of religious Jews in America, despite attempts of others to take a share of the market.

In Israel, the main grape juice is the Carmel Tirosh produced by Carmel Winery since the 1930s. It is the largest brand in the Israeli “wine” market. Until recently it was known simply as Tirosh. For consumers the word Tirosh meant Carmel. However, in the 2000s, exclusive use of the name was challenged in court and now every grape juice producer has a product named Tirosh.

Just as Americans prefer Kedem grape juice above all others, the Israelis prefer the Carmel taste, but it has become a more competitive business. Other win-

eries are today producing large quantities of grape juice, including Arza, Hacormim, Jerusalem, Segal, Teperberg and Zion. The Carmel Tirosh though, remains the Rolls-Royce of Israeli grape juices. It is arguably their most famous product in Israel, which has always caused problems image-wise. They make very good wines today, and no quality winery wants its grape juice to be its most well-known product!

Carmel Tirosh is made 100% from wine grapes with no water, sweetener or coloring agent added. The red (or rosé as it may be more accurately described), is made mainly from Carignan sometimes with small amounts of Argaman and Petite Sirah, whilst the white is made from Colombard and Muscat of Alexandria. It is a product that families have grown up with (*yayin leyeladim* – wine for children), and grown-ups who wish to avoid the alcohol or over-sweetness of kiddush wine will continue to use it for Shabbat and festivals. It is the ultimate family product.

The other product is kiddush or sacramental wine. Approximately four million bottles of kiddush wine are produced annually in Israel. This is 10% of the total amount of wine produced. This market sector is dominated by massive brands that have nurtured Jews over a lifetime of Seders, Shabbatot and festivals. Who has not heard of Manischewitz, Mogen David or Kedem in America or Palwin in Britain? These are brands with a big following. However, arguably the most famous Is-



ELI SHOR. The family is still making wine after nearly 170 years of winemaking. (Courtesy)



raeli kiddush wine is Konditon.

Konditon is a word that comes up in the history of Greek and Roman wine, as well as in the Jewish literature. It was a word to describe a spiced wine. In the 1860s the Shor family decided to produce a Konditon-style wine again. In those days wine was not bottled but sold in small casks. There were no labels or kashrut certificates. You bought from someone reputable whom you knew. When bottling and labeling became the norm, Konditon became not just a style of wine but a brand.

The wine was flavored and sweetened, but this was not new. This is what they did in biblical times to preserve the wine and make it tasty. Wine has been made this way for thousands of years.

Hacormim is today managed by Eli Shor, a charming, kind man with boundless enthusiasm. He has a winemaker, but Konditon is his baby. He delights in describing how he flavors the wine, building the flavor. Everything is designed to recreate the wines written about in the ancient sources, and by so doing, continuing the Shor family tradition.

The traditional, classic Konditon is fortified with brandy to roughly 14% alcohol. Its parchment-like label was designed by a Bezalel artist depicting scenes from Masada and Qumran. This retails for just under NIS 30. It is most regularly used as a kiddush wine, but Shor bristled when I said this, and said that they prefer

to categorize it as a dessert wine.

Now there is a new prestige, deluxe edition, the Konditon 18, which comes in an attractive, stylish package as a fortified dessert wine. It is made from a blend of Caladoc, Argaman, Carignan, Petit Verdot and Muscat Hamburg. It has spices from the Jerusalem area added, along with a touch of etrog zest, as well as silan (date honey), which provides the sweetness, and brandy aged in the winery's own cellar, which provides the alcohol. The final wine reaches 18% alcohol, hence the name, and it is matured for 36 months in oak barrels. It comes in a handsome presentation box and costs NIS 80.

Hacormim tells the story of how my distinguished relative, Sir Moses Montefiore, visited the Shor Winery, and it was this that persuaded him to invest in Jerusalem. Visit the winery and you will still see Eli Shor's parents, Yechiel and Nechama, still coming to work, well past retirement age. When I visited recently, Nechama, sharp as a button, said: "Oh, a Montefiore once visited us 25 years ago." What a memory! It was me! When I made aliya I arrived on their doorstep, eager to learn about the different Israeli wines.

Loving history as I do, I especially appreciate the use of the old Shor family logo on the labels. A nice touch. The other members of the family have spawned new boutique wineries to leave the liquid religion image be-

hind. Zion Winery began 1848 Winery, and from Arza Winery came forth Hayotzer. Hacormim, though, went retro and has gone back to the old family logo, Shorr 1848 (spelled with two r's then) for its Konditon wines.

Carmel was Israel's first commercial winery, founded by the Rothschild family in the 1880s. The Shor family founded Israel's first recorded winery in 1848 in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Carmel's growers are now in their sixth generation. These are largely the same families that planted Carmel's first vines. They were the owners of the cooperative and now remain part owners. How rare is it for shareholders of a company to stay the same over 130 years? The Shor family is in its seventh generation. Two of my children are in the wine trade. That is a mere two generations in this business. How special it is that the Shor family is still making wine after nearly 170 years. The Carmel Tirosh and Hacormim Konditon are like liquid time capsules representing the tradition and history of the wine-growing families of Carmel and the wine-making Shors. Here's hoping that they continue for many more generations. ■

The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for more than 30 years. He is known as "the ambassador of Israeli wine" and the "English voice of Israeli wine."

<http://adammontefiore.com>