

# PROOF OF THE PUDDING



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

It is now 30 years since Carlsberg Israel established its brewery in Ashkelon. Before that, Tempo Brewery was the undisputed beer monopoly, and the Central Bottling Company (CBC), aka Coca-Cola Israel, was king in soft drinks.

Then things suddenly became more competitive in the early 1990s. Tempo became the Israel bottlers of Pepsi Cola and importers of Heineken, and CBC Israel began importing Carlsberg. They started stepping on each other's toes. This was greatly to the benefit of the consumer, as it brought the Israeli beverage and drinks industry into a modern age.

I thought it would make an interesting article to commemorate the Ashkelon brewery's 30-year anniversary. It was surprising how hard I had to push to secure a meeting with Ofer Havkin, the beer sommelier of Carlsberg Israel, aka IBBL (International Beer Breweries Ltd.). It did not come easily. It is a subsidiary of CBC Israel, a juggernaut of soft drinks and alcoholic beverages and the number one total beverage company in Israel.

CBC Israel produces, imports, or represents the products of Coca-Cola and the British multinational Diageo company, the two largest soft drink and spirits companies in the world. Its portfolio ranges from global brands like Johnnie Walker, Carlsberg, and Coca-Cola to the local Prigat, Neviot, and Tabor Winery. Its head office is in Bnei Brak, behind the very visible Coca-Cola factory.

Over 20 years ago, I was working at Carmel Winery when CBC had the fleeting thought to enter the wine business through Israel's largest brewery. In the end, it bought a small boutique winery called Tabor Winery, founded by four vineyard growers. It grew the brand until it became the sixth-largest winery in the land. IBBL is the company within CBC responsible for wine and spirits. My son David Montefiore, DipWEST, was the one who built its wine import division.

Of course, when I finally met with Havkin, he was disarmingly charming, very fluent, and knowledgeable. I expected and hoped for a tutored tasting of the different beers in the portfolio and a presentation about the Israeli beer industry. Maybe I have been spoiled by being too long in the wine industry. What I got was an informal chat with Havkin, who was a well of information.

OFER HAVKIN is a giant of a man. It is almost as if he has to fold himself up to fit into his postage stamp office because his job is really out in the trade, in the training classroom, and visiting bars. He is the beer ambassador who fits into that space between the technical staff who make the beers, the sales team who sell them, and the bars and retailers that place orders.

He has an immense store of knowledge and a smile that could crack open any beer. He could out-beer talk



1664 IS a very fresh, fruity beer keeping the flag flying for France. (Ami Yaacoby)

CARLSBERG LUMA combines Carlsberg technology with Israeli ingenuity. (Photos: IBBL)

ies under one umbrella company. Goldstar became the best-selling beer and remains so to this day. Nesher remains the oldest existing brand.

In the early 1990s, CBC Israel decided to go into beer by representing Carlsberg, the giant Danish brewery, named after its founder's son Carl. In 1995, it founded the Carlsberg Israel Brewery to take on Tempo. It produces Carlsberg and Tuborg under license. In the early 2000s, interest in home brewing was fanned by competitions and festivals; and out of that, a craft brewery industry was born. Dancing Camel was the first. Others followed, such as Alexander, Golan, Jems, Malka, Negev, and Shapiro.

Havkin may be the face of Carlsberg IBBL, but the key figure behind the scenes is brewmaster (or brewmistress) Anat Meir. She is the chef, who has been there from the beginning – 30 years this year. Meir started her career at the bottom and worked her way up. Today, the brewmasters at both of Israel's largest breweries are women: Meir at Carlsberg and Marina Zeltser at Tempo.

Carlsberg is one of the world's iconic breweries, founded by JC Jacobsen in Copenhagen in 1847. In 1883, Carlsberg changed brewing forever by succeeding to isolate the yeast responsible for beer fermentation. This ensured control over the process that had previously been in the hands of the gods. The worldwide beer industry owes an eternal debt of gratitude to Carlsberg.

The main Carlsberg lager is reasonably bland but very refreshing. It is one of those global brands of beer that are everywhere. Its iconic advertising says it is "Probably the best beer in the world" – one of the great advertising slogans! The company initially invested in the Israeli brewery. Although no longer financially involved, it remains a joint venture in terms of maintaining international standards, shared expertise, and the latest technology.

IBBL also produces Tuborg under license. Tuborg was founded in 1873 in Denmark and has been part of the Carlsberg Group since 1970. Its main product is

most people, and certainly in Israel he is a wealth of information. There are only three beer sommeliers in Israel, and he is one of them, having received this certification in Germany at the Doemens World Brewing Academy in Munich. You can't beat that!

The beginnings of beer in modern Israel began in 1927 when Max Brau Pilsner was made by the Rozenberg Brothers in Acre. In 1934, Palestine Breweries was founded by James Rothschild and Frenchman Gaston Dreyfus. Rothschild's father had previously founded the Israeli wine industry. They rented a corner of Carmel's Rishon Le Zion Cellars. After the founding of the state, it became known as Nesher Brewery. It produced the first Goldstar beer in 1950.

The National Brewery was formed in Netanya in 1952; its most famous beer was Abir. In 1973 there was a consolidation, as the National Brewery purchased the Nesher and Galilee breweries. The modern beer industry in Israel took shape in 1985 when Tempo, a soft drink company, gathered the individual brewer-





Tuborg Pilsener, and its Tuborg Red was developed in Israel. This is a dark, European amber beer produced to compete with similarly styled Goldstar. I have heard it described as Munich or Vienna style, but I will leave that to the real experts. Certainly, I prefer this to the regular Carlsberg. It is full of flavor, rich and refreshing, and really fits the style preferred by Israelis.

IN 2017, Anat Meir, with IBBL's research and development team, began to develop a new beer called Luma. This combined Carlsberg's rigorous standards of quality with the Israeli creative gene. As a result, Carlsberg Luma was launched in 2020. It is an unfiltered lager of 5.2% alcohol, with a citrusy, hoppy aroma. It is made from malted barley and wheat, and three varieties of hops that are added at an advanced stage of the fermentation (dry hopping). Luma is a crossroads beer that has the color of a blonde beer, refreshing elements of lager, the fruitiness of a wheat beer, and the bitterness of an IPA. It is flavorful, refreshing, and original. I loved it when I first tasted it, and if it is on tap I will not pass it by. It is a great addition to the portfolio and an Israeli creation.

In 2021, IBBL responded to market forces by entering the craft brewery market. It called its new brand Shikma, which means "sycamore tree." It is also the name of a nearby stream and water reservoir. IBBL initially produced three beers: an IPA, Amber Ale, and Marzen Lager. I loved the IPA, but it is not as pale as is traditional. I imagine the color was tweaked with more roasted malt to fit the Israeli preferred color profile. However, it is delicious, refreshing, and the Brit in me likes it (I was weaned on IPA in England).

The Amber Ale is more yeasty and malty, certainly as a nod to the Israeli style. The Marzen Lager completes the portfolio. It is a beer traditionally made in March at the end of winter for drinking in the summer. Now IBBL has just launched a new Blonde Ale, which it describes as a light, European-style beer. Of course, Shikma is most famous for using malt from barley grown in the Western Negev. Supporting the farmers of the region is an important symbolic gesture. All IBBL's beers are good, but my favorite by far is the IPA.

IBBL always imported an impressive range of beers.



In the early days, these included two of the world's most famous, iconic beers: Guinness from Ireland, and Weihenstephaner from Germany. Out of all of them, these have stood the test of time and are still with CBC.

WEIHENSTEPHANER FROM Bavaria brought a new style of beer to Israel. That is Weiss Beer, sometimes called white beer or wheat beer. The brewery dates from 1675, but it claims it goes back to 1040. In our terms, this is an incredibly long, rich history. Its core beer is fresh, fruity, and very aromatic. Maybe it is the beer equivalent of a Gewurztraminer or Muscat. Despite the difficulty of pronunciation and spelling, Weihenstephaner has become the byword for wheat beer in Israel and has helped to create a new category.

Guinness is the famous dark stout from Dublin's fair city, where the girls are so pretty. It is a comparatively new brewery compared to Weihenstephaner because Arthur Guinness only started brewing in 1759! Guinness is one of the great beers of the world.

It has been around a long time but was in a long, slow decline. However, fanned by the young generation, Guinness has had an astonishing revival, to the extent that sales had to be rationed last year to cope with demand. It is not such a big brand in Israel, but it's kind of reassuring that it is here. When I find it, I order it. Guinness is probably my favorite beer.



Top L to bottom:

AN IMPORTANT job of the beer sommelier is training barman; here, teaching how to pour bottled beer.

A NEWISH craft brewery launched by IBBL.

WEIHENSTEPHANER, ONE of the world's oldest breweries, created the new category of wheat beers in Israel. (Michal Sela)

POPULAR, REFRESHING beer from Barcelona.

Apart from Weihenstephaner and Guinness, IBBL also represents other famous breweries. Estrella Damm is a Catalan beer brewed in Barcelona since 1876. It is a crisp, light, refreshing drink. IBBL also has a beer for celiacs: Estrella Damm Daura, which is gluten-free. I have friends who will be delighted to know this. Top of the range is the Inedit, an unusual beer blended from malted barley and wheat, flavored with coriander, licorice, etc. This unique expression, which comes in a large bottle, was crafted by the great chef Ferran Adria.

Another famous import is 1664, the famous pale lager wheat beer produced by Kronenbourg. It was first brewed in 1664 in Alsace and is owned by the Carlsberg Group. 1664 is delightful; fresh, very fruity, with a little spiciness.

While it is true that CBC Israel brings some big international names to Israel, what is most interesting to me are the locally conceived and produced beers. As we say in England, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. No doubt in my mind, Carlsberg Luma and Shikma are great additions to the Israeli beer scene. ■

*The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 38 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*