

TEN WINES FOR 75 YEARS



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

We are about to celebrate our 75th anniversary as a country. Once, for those abroad, Israel was symbolized by the Jaffa orange and the kibbutz. Today, Israel is regarded as the Start-Up Nation. Hi-tech is what the country is best known for, and the most representative product of the Land of Israel and people of Israel is wine. After all, you can't give a bottle of hi-tech as a present.

Our wine history may be divided into two parts: pre-1976 and post-1976. In that year, the roots of the Israel wine revolution were planted. It was the year vineyards were first planted on the Golan Heights and Israel's first international style wine was produced. These unconnected events were a turning point.

I have selected 10 wines which, in my opinion, best tell the Israeli wine story.

PALWIN No. 10 1950s

At the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, most of the wine drunk was liquid religion – that is to say, sweet red wine. The name Palwin is an abbreviation of “Palestinian wine.” It was sold by the Palestinian Wine & Trading Company founded in 1898 in London and was Israel's first wine brand.

Before the state was founded, there were many Palwin wines, each with its own number. These were to make it easier for new immigrants to identify. After the establishment of Israel, only four survived. The biggest brand was No.10. Palwin, which was so dominant in Britain that Brits grew up thinking it was part of Judaism.

CARMEL HOCK 1960s

By the 1960s, Carmel Hock had become the largest selling wine. It was sold in a tall slim bottle. The wine was semi-dry, or maybe even a little sweeter than that. Older folk will remember adding sparkling soda water to their Carmel Hock to make a spritzer.

CARMEL CABERNET SAUVIGNON SPECIAL RESERVE 1976

Carmel sold the first varietals made from Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc in the late 1960s. Grenache Rose and Adom Atik were the big sellers. However, in 1976 they produced a wine aged in small oak barrels for the first time. The winemaker Freddie Stiller had no budget for oak barrels for wine, but the winery sold a great deal of brandy in those days. He cheekily decided to switch some of his limousin oak barrels reserved for brandy in which to age his precious wine.

Believe it or not, the grapes came from a vineyard in Rishon Lezion, though it was not long before the vineyards were grubbed up, as it became apparent that real estate was more profitable than growing grapes.

The next in the series, the 1979, came

from a Galilee vineyard. The wine had a picture of Baron Edmond de Rothschild on the label, and it was sold in wooden cases like a top-quality international wine. The wine was still alive after 20 years.

YARDEN CABERNET SAUVIGNON 1984

The Golan Heights Winery was founded in 1983. Their Yarden Sauvignon Blanc 1983 was called “Israel's first world-class wine” in America. Later, their Yarden Katzrin 1990 was Israel's first “icon” wine. However, the wine that made the most noise was the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1984. In 1987, this wine won not only a gold medal but also the Winiarski Trophy for the best red wine in the IWSC (International Wine & Spirit Competition) in London.

Peter Stern, the wine consultant to the Golan Heights Winery, had walked the Ramat Naftali vineyard, picking the best lots to go into this wine. It was a triumph for him and winemaker Andy Starr. It was an astonishing result and the first of many awards for Yarden, which put Israel firmly on the international wine map. Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon became Israel's most famous wine in international wine markets.

SELECTED EMERALD RIESLING 1990s

The largest selling wine in the 1990s was Carmel's Selected Emerald Riesling. This was a cross between Muscadelle and Riesling developed by UC Davis in 1948, the year Israel was founded. It did not succeed anywhere but Israel, where it became a phenomenon. Emerald Riesling was a semi-dry white wine, and it introduced many people to wine, such as Liebfraumilch in Britain and Lambrusco in America. The winemaker of Carmel was Israel Flam, the father of the Flam brothers, who today run one of our finest wineries. Selected is a 50-year-old brand and still a leader in the mass market.

MARGALIT CABERNET SAUVIGNON 1993

The 1990s was the beginning of the boutique wine revolution. Margalit Winery was the first quality boutique winery founded in 1989, and the 1993 was their best of the decade. This illustrated that small wineries could make high-quality wines, and it encouraged many winemaking hobbyists and growers to start taking winemaking more seriously. Yair Margalit was the owner-winemaker. He also was a consultant to other new small wineries. For me, this wine represents the boom of small wineries that followed.

YARDEN BLANC DE BLANCS NV

The Golan Heights Winery made traditional method sparkling wines, creating a category that did not exist in Israel. In 1996, this wine won the Schramsberg Trophy for the Best Bottle Fermented Sparkling Wine at the IWSC in London. It was a great reward for the winery's investment in quality. The wine even in those days was a vin-



YARDEN CABERNET Sauvignon 1984 won a gold medal and trophy at the IWSC in London – Israeli wine was never the same again. (Photos: Wineries mentioned)



TELLING ISRAEL'S wine story (from L): Razi'el; Carmel Special Reserve; Sphera Signature; Vitkin Carignan; Castel Grand Vin; Shores Blanc; Margalit Cabernet Sauvignon.

tage wine; after this award, it was sold with the vintage year on the bottle. This was Victor Schoenfeld's baby. When he joined the Golan Heights Winery in 1991, he went to France to learn the secrets of the Champenoise. This was the result, and it became one of the outstanding wines of the country... and won many more awards.

CASTEL GRAND VIN 2003

Domaine du Castel has had so many great wines. The winery's Grand Vin and C Blanc du Castel have, in numerous forums, been Israel's leading red and white wines. I chose this one because it was Castel's first totally kosher vintage...and the winery won more awards when kosher than before. This was therefore the wine that slayed the holy cow that kosher wines were somewhat inferior. The Grand Vin was a Bordeaux style blend. Most of the best wines were previously varietals, and it was a wine which helped to pioneer the Judean Hills Wine Region. Eli Ben-Zaken, the founder, owner-winemaker, with an attention to detail, perfectionism and professionalism, taught Israeli wine about quality, style and aesthetics.

YARDEN MOUNT HERMON RED 2000s

In the early 2000s, Mount Hermon Red, now under the Hermon label, became Israel's largest-selling wine. This confirmed the change in popularity from white wines to red, and also illustrated that the quality revolution had arrived in the mass market. As they say, to

make a fine wine of only 10,000 bottles is comparatively easy. To make 100,000 bottles of a less expensive wine is really challenging. Well, at one stage Victor Schoenfeld, the winemaker of the Golan Heights Winery, was producing a million and a half bottles of this wine.

VITKIN CARIGNAN 2008

Assaf Paz was a winemaker who saw an old vine vineyard of Carignan previously used for producing grape juice and Kiddush wine and decided that with the right TLC, he could make a really good wine. As such, Carignan, the ugly duckling of Israeli winemaking, became a beautiful swan. The first was made in 2002, but the 2008 was an excellent vintage.

Vitkin's Carignan was the catalyst that made wineries look at our heritage varieties like Carignan and Petite Sirah again, and encouraged more use of the Mediterranean varieties. Paz's vision and courage to follow his hunch encouraged the whole industry to change direction.

TZORA SHORESH 2013

This was a single vineyard white wine of extraordinary intensity and minerality from the Shores vineyard, high up in the Judean Hills. For me, it represents a number of things: the revolution in the quality of white wines; the new focus on precision viticulture; and the new search for identity. Tzora's wines are named after the region, the vineyard and a single plot, moving the focus from the variety to where it is grown. As

such, they symbolize for me the idea of making wine with a sense of place. The winemaker-CEO of Tzora Vineyards is Eran Pick, Israel's first Master of Wine.

FINALLY, AN either/or. It is too early to judge the wines that will have the most effect in the 2020s, so here I hedge my bets.

SPHERA WHITE SIGNATURE 2022

A white wine made by Israel's ultimate white wine specialist, Sphera Winery. This wine is so precise mineral, with a great core of acidity. Most Israeli whites have tropical fruit flavors that dominate, but the mouth feel disappears. This wine stays with you through to a long finish. It is hard to believe we are making white wines like this in Israel. A beautiful expression by the winemaker, illustrating Doron Rav Hon's philosophy. This is a wine to measure the coming decade by.

RAZI'EL 2020

This is a focused, tight, elegant Mediterranean style blend, made from Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre and Carignan. It is made by the Ben-Zaken family, owners of Domaine du Castel. Israeli wines at the top level have been dominated by Cabernet Sauvignons, Bordeaux style blends or blends of Cabernet Sauvignon with Mediterranean varieties. This is a Med blend which has received the highest third-party recognition for a relatively new winery. Maybe it is a signpost for the future. Time will tell.

ON THE substitute's bench are Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1985; Yatir Forest 2003; and Carmel Kayoumi Shiraz 2006. Three very successful wines I was personally involved with, which each received milestone recognition. I nearly added the Recanati Rosé 2007, too. They were pioneers in high-end rosé, putting it in a nice bottle and pricing up. It opened the way for a new category of quality rosé.

The Cremisan Monastery Hamdani Jandali 2011 was the first wine of indigenous varieties to gain notice. The Segal Argaman 2008 was the first award-winning Argaman, an Israeli variety. I am aware that I have not named a dessert wine. The Yarden Sauvignon Blanc Late Harvest 1988, a unique one-off; and Yarden Heights Wine 2008, winner of the Grand Gold in Vinitaly, were very close candidates. In the end, all of these did not make the list not because they were not worthy but because they did not represent for me the decade like the wines I selected.

So, here you have it. Ten wines to represent the 75 years of Israel. These are not necessarily the best wines nor the ones that won the most awards, but for me personally, they represent the era they were part of and help to tell our wine story. ■

The writer is a wine industry insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com



(L) IN THE early days, Israelis drank sweet wines; Palwin was the country's first wine brand.

YARDEN BLANC de Blancs was a major award winner in 1996; thereafter, it became one of Israel's great wines.

WINE WITH a sense of place: Shores Blanc from Tzora's Vineyards symbolizes the white wine revolution and the new importance of identity.