

A KID WITH A CRAZY DREAM



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

I met Avi Leitner at Cafeneto in Ra'anana. I was expecting some slickly dressed entrepreneurial whiz kid, bristling with overconfidence and well-rehearsed marketing platitudes. He walked right past me when he came in, and I didn't give him a second look. However, when we finally hooked up, he was the opposite of what I had been expecting.

He was like any unassuming New York lawyer and I thought, "What a nice guy," but I did not detect passion, drive, or the vision of a dreamer. However, although there is no lack of Jewish New York lawyers who have made *aliyah*, only one has planted blue agave in the Negev in order to make an Israeli expression of a tequila-like alcoholic beverage.

Yet again I learned you should not judge a book by its cover. As Leitner told me his story in a slightly self-deprecating, laid-back way, I was gradually struck by everything I missed. The three D's – determination, drive, and a dream – were there all right but slightly camouflaged.

When I came to Israel, the wineries made the main spirits. Carmel Mizrahi made a product from imported molasses called Tehila, which was a poor imitation of tequila. They also had products like Captain Rum and Lord Gin. You get the idea and can imagine the quality. All these disappeared when the import gates opened and the big global brands arrived.

When that happened, the *feinschmeckers* chose Scotch whisky, and the prize for volume went to vodka. It was only in the last 15 years that a local artisan distillery trend began but on a very small scale. Julius Distillery led the way, followed by the likes of Golani, Pelter, M&H, and Yerushalmi. The one that reached the furthest in international circles is the M&H Whisky Distillery, which has brought Israeli whisky to the world.

The spirit of choice in the Jewish world is whisky, especially Scotch malt whisky (without an "e") as opposed to American, Canadian, or Irish whiskey (with an "e"). The rise of *Kiddush* clubs brought the new passion for whisky into the synagogue, and the growing number of whisky mavens would love talking about it, comparing notes almost as much as drink-



DON'T BE fooled! This is not Mexico but Kibbutz Alumim in the Western Negev.

(Photos: Avi Leitner)

AVI LEITNER is the kid with a crazy dream.

ing. Part of the reason for its prominence was, in my opinion, because whisky was regarded as "safe *treif*."

So when Avi Leitner was invited for a tippie on a visit to Mexico, he asked for a whisky. His hosts sniggered among themselves, and he was told in no uncertain terms: "Well, here, we drink tequila." Thus this New Yorker was introduced to a whole new world. He remembers tequila as something you drank at a high school party to get drunk. After his introduction to the quality and variety of tequila, he described it as every bit as complex and interesting as Scotch.

TEQUILA IS a spirit made in Mexico from the blue agave plant. It is made from the pina, the heart of the plant that looks a little like a pineapple. It is cooked to break it down, crushed to make a mash, fermented, and then distilled twice. Pot stills give a more characterful expression; continuous stills produce a more commercial, *parve* result.

Tequila is part of the mezcal family. In the same way

as cognac is a brandy but not all brandy is cognac, tequila is a mezcal but not all mezcal is tequila. Emily Price, writing in *Forbes*, described the differences this way: "Tequila is the refined cousin who always follows the rules; the mezcal is the artsy sibling who is always experimenting."

The product once did not have a good image. I asked someone what he knew about tequila, and he immediately responded: "Yuk, is that the one with a worm in it?" In fact, the dreaded worm does not appear in tequila. If one appears at all, it will be in a cheap bottle of mezcal.

In popular culture, the way to drink tequila in a bar was immortalized in films. It was served in a shot glass with salt and a slice of lime, and required a "lick, sip, and suck" in swift succession. I first became aware of tequila in the cocktail Tequila Sunrise. When I took my first steps in the drinks industry in Britain, every cocktail list seemed to have it. The mixture of tequila, orange juice, and grenadine was striking to look at, particularly in a tall highball glass, hence its popularity.

These days, tequila has a more regal image. Perhaps it is most famous internationally as the integral part of the Margarita cocktail. Along with a Negroni and Bloody Mary, it is my favorite cocktail. It is made from tequila, the orange-flavored Triple Sec, and freshly squeezed lime juice, and served with salt around the rim of the glass.

It has its own glass, which is a variation of the old champagne coupe (a broad, flat, shallow glass). Though invented in the 1930s, the Margarita has stood the test of time and is usually part of even the shortest cocktail menu. It is zingy and refreshing.

A more recent trend asserts that quality tequila is far more rewarding and may be enjoyed differently. The dictionary of tequila includes words such as "joven;" "bianco," or "silver" (young); "reposado" (aged in oak



NEWLY PLANTED young blue agave plants taking root in the Negev.

THE PINA, or heart of the blue agave, resembles a pineapple.

casks); “anejo” (barrel aged for a minimum of one year); and “extra anejo” (aged in casks for at least three years). The connoisseur will most likely nurse it in a brandy balloon, neat or on the rocks, and sip it slowly with occasional gentle swirling to release aromas.

WHEN LEITNER began to appreciate the nuances of tequila, he could not help noticing the conditions in which blue agave is grown. A mischievous idea came to him: Why not try to grow it in the Negev? He was not an entrepreneur, agriculturist, or even in the drinks business, yet in the spark of an idea, he became all three.

Of course, he had to have exhaustive patience and reserves of determination he did not know he possessed. The Israeli bureaucracy stood in his way, but if Leitner could not get in the door, he would come down the chimney. The Agriculture Ministry prohibited him from bringing in the plants, so he brought in cell tissue, grew them in a greenhouse for a year, and only then had the plants in hand. He also had to find someone who wanted to grow it.

He found willing partners in Kibbutz Alumim in the Western Negev. In Eran Braverman, he discovered a farmer who would have the same passion and eagerness to learn. They wanted to do it right. Taking advice from Mexican consultants at every step, he utilized Braverman’s skills as a farmer and the supportive commitment of the partners at the kibbutz.

They combined Israeli agri-tech and Zionist ingenuity with the natural attributes of the Negev Desert to plant 35 hectares of blue agave in the Negev. The next objective is to build a distillery. Leitner does not just want to grow something unique in Israel, he wants to produce the first authentic tequila-style mezcal – homegrown, distilled, and matured in the Holy Land.

However, he can’t call it tequila! That has been a challenge. Imagine the M&H Distillery having to market its world-class product without using the word “whisky.”

In the meantime, Leitner has gotten closer to the spirits industry, speaking to all the Israeli players. He became an investor in the Yerushalmi Distillery, which produces whisky. A good example for him is the very successful Golani Distillery at Katzrin. Leitner describes owner Davi Zibell as a “mentor, consultant, and model”.

The principle of investing in agriculture in the



Negev began with David Ben-Gurion, who planted

ERAN BRAVERMAN is the person responsible for planting and caring for the blue agave.

agave plants (though not the blue agave) at Moshav Gilat in the Negev in the 1950s. Their purpose was to make rope, but when synthetic fibers came to be used, the plants were just left as a memorial to what seemed a good idea at the time.

After Oct. 7, 2023, the investment became an even greater *mitzvah*. Kibbutz Alumim was one of the communities attacked by Hamas. Nineteen Thai and Nepalese workers were murdered in cold blood by the brutal terrorists. Two were kidnapped to Gaza; one was released, but the other is still there, captive in Sinwar’s tunnels.

The plight of the foreign workers is sometimes forgotten because of the sheer mass of the horrors, but they came to work hard, with a smile, showing great loyalty, and were not part of any local dispute. They

just got caught up in the nightmare. It showed the brutality of Hamas that they were not spared. The memory of each one of them is a blessing. May their families know no more sorrow. Leitner’s initiative offers hope and support, as well as future tourism and employment in a region so scarred by the most unbelievable and unfathomable expression of evil in our times.

Leitner, president of the Blue Agave Israel Group, and his partner, Avi Rosenfeld, have done minimal public relations, preferring to wait until there is a product to show. Leitner is not into gimmicks and does not have to resort to them because he will be the first. Recently, he took a group of journalists and industry influencers to see the Alumim fields growing row upon row of blue agave – an amazing and impressive sight.

In Israel, good ideas are copied, and success can have many fathers. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Do you remember how many frozen yogurt stores and sushi restaurants instantly opened when they first came to Israel? Well, another company has been formed called Negave Estates. Note the play on words between “Negev” and “agave.”

It has done the opposite to Leitner, immediately marketing at the outset and outlining its vision. It has a slick website, full of promises. It will be making its first product distilled in tequila country in Mexico but will mature it in Israel (like Thinkers Distillery). But as of yet, the company is still at the very earliest stage, so even if the vision is exciting, the marketing noise may be premature. However, we will be watching it closely, too. There is a place for everyone (as is the case with the plethora of new Israeli whiskies), and one start-up will help the other.

Leitner made aliyah in 1991 and is now 60. Talking to him, I realized that gloss and marketing slogans do not make authenticity. He is totally authentic and is on a journey that he has forged on his own. When Leonard Cohen was in his mid-70s, the legendary singer/songwriter looked back and described himself at 60 as “just a kid with a crazy dream.” That fits. Slowly slowly, as quickly as agriculture allows, Avi Leitner’s crazy dream is coming to fruition. ■

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