

PURIM IS the time for a party, with good-value wine. The Selected brand of Carmel Winery is nearly 50 years old. (Eyal Keren)

DRINKING TO REMEMBER...

... or maybe to forget



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Purim is a wine-drinking festival. Even the God-fearing Jew who drinks grape juice on festivals and every Shabbat will throw caution to the wind and drink wine on Purim.

The idea is to drink enough so one is unable to tell the difference between the phrases “Blessed be Mordechai” and “Cursed be Haman.”

The Purim story gives us insight into wine consumption in an unlikely place. The revelous Persia of those days is in stark contrast to the ultra-strict Islamic regime of Iran today. Wine-infused parties were all the rage. Just read the Scroll of Esther. Many even attribute the discovery of wine to a tale in Persian folklore about a princess who wanted to commit suicide because she had fallen out of favor with a King Jamshid. She spotted some grapes that happened to have started fermenting naturally and thought they looked poisonous, so she ate them and fell into a deep drunken sleep. When she awoke, the world seemed a brighter place. She told the king of her discovery and was immediately received back into his graces. The secret of wine had been discovered.

A nice story, and the folklore is somewhat supported by archaeology. One of the earliest places that evidence of wine was found is in northwestern Iran in the Zagros Mountains. Wine residue that was dated back to 5,400 BCE was detected in clay jars in a village called

Hajii Firuz Tepe. When you realize this was not so far from Georgia and Eastern Turkey, it certainly makes geographical sense.

Then, there was the beautifully named Shiraz, which is today Iran’s fifth largest city. In ancient times it was known as a center for wine, poetry and gardens. The most famous poet who came from Shiraz was the national treasure Hafes, who lived from 1315 to 1390. He wrote, “With wine beside a gently flowing brook...”

Before him there were other great Persian poets. Abu Nuwas (756 to 814) was born in Iran and was known for poems of wine and debauchery. This thought is his: “But drink among roses a rose-red wine.” Afterwards, there came Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) who suggested: “Drink wine. This is life eternal.” These three great poets wrote wonderful wine poetry, even after the rise of Islam.

AT THE Purim *seuda* (festive meal) it is customary to drink wine. It is also a custom to give *mishloach manot* (gift baskets). This was originally to enable poor people to enjoy a Seuda and would normally include baked goods and wine. Many wineries produce half bottles of 375 ml., ideal for this purpose. If not, some wineries still produce 187 ml. bottles of kiddush wine. Mini bottles should be more in vogue this year, because of virtual tastings conducted by some wineries. Blue Nun also sells mini 200 ml. bottles, which are the perfect size. Wine lovers can look to the gift packages that

most wineries merchandise to assist with innovative choices of gifts for Purim.

As Purim is a festival where volume is more of an issue than quality, I believe this is the time to focus on wines costing less than NIS 50. Wines at these price points have never been better. I disdain those who boast, “I never drink wines under NIS 50.” You can’t disenfranchise the majority of the wine drinking public by snobbery. Unfortunately, most wine critics only write about more expensive wines and most wineries show only their better wines at tastings, festivals and exhibitions. However, there is no shame in buying on price. Be sure, even though these wines are not what people talk about, that millions of bottles of Barkan Classic, Carmel Selected, Hermon and Shel Segal are being sold and enjoyed each year. So certainly do not feel under any kind of peer pressure to buy upscale.

You should know it is a great deal more difficult to make a mass-market wine of 500,000 bottles than a prestige wine of 10,000 bottles. No doubt the quality of this category of wines has improved no end, even if some are more suitable for drinking than tasting. Anyway, you don’t need a symposium around every wine you drink. Certainly buying opportunities abound. A definite crossover is occurring between the mass and quality markets. These days more supermarkets have quality wine sections and more wine stores have wines at supermarket prices.

The main wineries offering wines under NIS 50 are



(FROM LEFT) Torres de Espania, Teperberg Gewurztraminer, Dalton Kna'an, Hayotzer Moscato, Zion Estate Shiraz, Mount Hermon Rose, Barkan Classic Sauvignon Blanc, Cavit Pinot Grigio. (Photos: Wineries mentioned)

the larger ones. To help you identify them, the largest 12 wineries in Israel and their main entry-level labels are: Barkan-Segal (Gold Reserve, Classic, Shel Segal), Carmel (Private Collection, Selected), Teperberg (Impression, Vision), Golan Heights (Hermon), Arza-Hayotzer (Virtuoso, Genesis), Zion (Estate, Imperial), Tabor (Har), Binyamina (Moshava, Teva), Jerusalem (Vintage 2900), Recanati (Jonathan, Yasmin), Tishbi (Tishbi) and Dalton (Knan). Your selection of wines under NIS 50 will likely come from one of these.

THE NEXT key to buying wine at this level is to decide what grape variety you want. It is simpler than you think. Most wines in supermarkets are varietals, meaning they are named after the dominant variety. The reds tend to be made either from Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot or Shiraz. The whites are usually made from Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc or Gewurztraminer. If you know something only about these varieties, you are halfway to knowing something about the wine.

Cabernet Sauvignon is Israel's most planted variety. The Carmel Selected Cabernet Sauvignon is always flavorful with good typicity. The word 'Selected' first featured on Carmel labels way back in 1972 and since 1987 it became the major brand it has remained until today. Carmel is of course the historic winery of Israel, founded by Baron Edmond de Rothschild. Their Zichron Ya'acov Cellars founded in 1892, is the oldest winery, or factory for that matter, still in use.

Merlot is Israel third-most planted variety. The Binyamina Moshava Merlot is a good example. It is easy drinking and refreshing, with good fruit. Binyamina Winery was established in 1952 on the site of a Jasmine perfume factory founded by James Rothschild.

Shiraz (aka Syrah) is the other most common red wine variety you are likely to meet. The Zion Estate Shiraz is fruity, with mouth-filling flavor and a clean, fresh finish. Zion Winery is our oldest winery, founded in 1848. Remarkably and uniquely, the Shor family has not only owned and managed the winery for 173 years, but also a member of the Shor family has always been the winemaker, even today.

Wines of under NIS 50 will be lighter and easier drinking than wines of a higher price. Though it is a mistake to generalize, but when comparing like with like, the Cabernets will probably be fuller-bodied than Merlot and the Shiraz will likely be fruitier.

NOW FOR the white varieties. If Cabernet is the king of grapes, then Chardonnay is the queen. Many people don't appreciate that Chablis, which is so popular here, is a Chardonnay by another name. The Har Tabor Chardonnay is in the modern style. It is apple, broad flavored and refreshing. Tabor Winery is a pioneer in ecological vineyards.

Lately, there are some very good Israeli Sauvignon Blancs. The Barkan Classic Sauvignon Blanc is dry, bright, aromatic, refreshing and a good value. These days, Barkan is the largest winery in Israel. Founded in 1990, it is situated in Hulda, alongside the largest vineyard in the country.

The third white variety is Gewurztraminer. If you are unable to pronounce it, ask for 'Gevurtz'. The Teperberg Impression Gewurztraminer is aromatic and semi dry, and yet is refreshing when served very cold. Teperberg is Israel's largest family winery, founded in 1870 in the Old City of Jerusalem. I recently wrote that in my opinion, they were the most improved winery of the last decade. They are making great wines at every price point.

For some, semi dry is not enough and they will be seeking something sweeter. Muscat is a grape usually used for sweet wines. The idea of Purim is not to get blind drunk, and I certainly recommend a Moscato for those either not used to drinking alcohol or that do not usually like wine. Hayotzer Winery is a frothy, fruity Moscato, which is low alcohol, slightly sparkling and sweet. The winery is owned by another branch of the Shor family.

For those that like rose, you have to choose a color you like (somewhere in between onion skin pink and a weak red) and whether you want dry or semi dry. Apart from these two decisions, the grape variety is not that significant. Golan Heights Winery's Mount Hermon Rose is a popular wine, dry but very fruity. The Golan

Heights Winery is the pioneer of the Golan wine region, as well as being at the forefront of the quality revolution here.

THE ALTERNATIVE to following grape varieties is to look for brands you know or like. These are usually blends known by a generic name rather than the varieties. Of these, I recommend the Dalton Knan Red, which is fruity and full-flavored, and Recanati Yasmin White, which is crisp and fragrant. Both represent fantastic value. Both Dalton and Recanati Winery are closely associated with the Upper Galilee. Dalton is one of the main pioneers of the Galilee and Recanati is currently building a brand new winery there.

There is also a very drinkable range of imported wines at great prices. For example, the fresh Cavit Pinot Grigio from Italy and fruity Torres de Espania Cabernet Sauvignon from Spain, which are respectively available from the Yain B'Ir chain of wine stores and the Shufersal range of supermarkets.

Whatever your choice, Purim is a fun festival where wine is an integral part. What I am not sure about is whether we drink to remember the Feast of Lots, or to forget the differences between Mordechai and Haman. I am already confused and I have not even had a glass yet!

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



VINO LOVERS should check out gift boxes from wineries for mishloach manot – like these from Tulip (left) and Maia.