



KIBBUTZ BE'ERI'S winemaker checks grapes in the vineyard.

(Photos: Kibbutz Be'eri)

IN PURSUIT OF A MISSION AND A DREAM



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Tom Carbone is a blend of Australia and Italy, two stellar wine-producing countries. His mother hailed from Sydney and his father from Rome. He studied viticulture and oenology in Milan and recently launched his first wine, which was sold out within a very short time.

However, as interesting as all this is, what places

Carbone's wine unequivocally into the spotlight is the name "Be'eri" on its label. This is the kibbutz in the northwestern Negev where the very worst of the atrocities took place on Oct. 7.

Kibbutz Be'eri has become the overriding symbol of alongside their precious wines. Dror and his wife, Yonah, were among those murdered in cold blood. Two of their three children, Noam and Alma, were kidnapped by Hamas and were released in a deal at the end of November.

Another victim was Dror Or, Be'eri's chief cheesemaker. For months he was presumed to be among the hostages taken by Hamas but was later discovered to have been murdered on that dreadful, black day.

Carbone, his wife, and their one-year-old son were in their safe room from 6:50 a.m. until 2 a.m. the following night. What they suffered is unbearable to think about. What went on there will haunt Israelis and Jews everywhere for generations.

We arrived at the dairy to meet Carbone and hear about his dreams. Unsure of what to say, we did not want to be guilty of voyeurism, but we did want to hear the full story. We need not have worried. Carbone, dressed in the whites of a dairy worker, gave us a friendly welcome. He is not a towering figure but stands tall with his shoulders back. His hair is red and he sports a light beard and a ready smile, his manner is relaxed, and he exudes easy confidence.



DROR OR, trained chef, accomplished cheesemaker. Murdered on Oct. 7. May his memory be a blessing.

THE FIRST harvest of Be'eri wine. BE'ERI CHARDONNAY 2023 is a beautiful wine. (Adam Montefiore)

He gave us the dairy tour. Then, armed with a well-chilled bottle of wine and a platter of cheeses, he led us to Gan HaShishim. We found ourselves in an oasis of tranquility. Probably the calmest and most beautiful place on the kibbutz. We sat on wooden benches, hearing the sound of tinkling water in the background. Plump goldfish darting among the lotus flowers in the ponds. The rustle of the wind and the hot sun made the wine even more refreshing. As the conversation flowed, we enjoyed sip after sip accompanied by slices of cheese. By the end of our visit, we had polished off the bottle and two cheeses.

It was all slightly incongruous. We sat seemingly without a care in the world, in a place representing a piece of heaven, and we talked wine, as though that was the most important thing in the world. One could for a moment forget the death, destruction, and horrific memories all around us. However, on Oct. 7, this Garden of Eden represented

hell on Earth. In truth, though we initially skirted around the subject, the memories were never far from the surface.

Carbone has a dream to make wine, and he certainly has the qualifications. His vision is agriculture, a dairy, a winery, gastronomy and tourism working hand in hand; to build something with a sense of peace that would represent the kibbutz. Since Oct. 7, he has become more determined, and his dream is becoming a vision. Who knows, we might return in three years' time to find the Be'eri vineyard, winery, dairy, and restaurant working together in close proximity, a must-visit destination for food and wine tourism. That was the dream he shared with Dror. Now he needs to do it for Dror and in his memory.

Carbone is diligent, careful, and smart, a good combination of qualities to have acquired previous to entering the wine trade. He knows that it is easy to grow vines, and it is not too hard to make wine. However,

the difficulty lies in sales. The late Carmi Lebenstein of Carmel Mizrahi used to say, "Making wine is an art, but selling it is a profession." So, Carbone gathered together some wines from elsewhere in Israel and held a few tastings and wine evenings to prove to the kibbutz, and probably more to himself, that he could talk about wine, present it, and sell it. Of course, he passed his own test with flying colors. Passion and knowledge are the perfect sales tools, and he has both to spare.

In August 2023, he harvested Chardonnay at Ness Harim. The Chardonnay was fermented and aged *sur lies* (on lees) in oak barrels. It was bottled in the new year (2024) and launched in the spring. He could have chosen a fancy Italian-style label, paying homage to his roots, but after Oct. 7 "Be'eri" became the only possible name. The label evidences a "less is more"





WINEMAKER MEETS cheesemaker as wheels of cheese mature in the background.



KIBBUTZ BE'ERI produces artisanal cheeses popular with the wineries for their tasting rooms.

approach. It bears a simple drawing of the Be'eri water tower and the original *beit bitachon* (security building). The wine was so good that it sold out quickly. When we turned up, he generously opened one of his last bottles. It was delicious: Fresh, fragrant, with the complexity of oak aging clearly apparent but lacking any heaviness or richness. It was a lovely bottle of wine



TOM CARBONE opens a bottle of his precious wine. (Adam Montefiore)

which slipped down with ease. In my eyes, the testament to a good wine is an empty bottle... and this was finished without us even noticing. The next Be'eri wine will be a red Merlot. We are looking forward to it. If Carbone needs advice or has any doubts, he contacts Dror Engelstein of UnderDog Vineyards. They became friends when they studied together in Italy. Engelstein has more winemaking experience, but he is quick to give credit where it is due: His friend has done an excellent job. Carbone's interest lies less in reds and more in crisp whites and rosés. He would like to focus on these styles, which are so suitable for Israel's climate and cuisine. They also pair better with most cheeses than reds and grow better in the mineral-rich loess soil of the region. I believe this could be an excellent focus, and it is in keeping with modern trends.

He also believes in not sourcing the grapes from elsewhere but growing them himself. Carbone dreams of planting his vineyard at Kibbutz Be'eri. He is not looking for Cabernet Sauvignons and Chardonnays but varieties more in keeping with our hot climate and the local desert terroir. It is early days yet, but he spoke of Carignan and Colombard, excellent choices. These are our heritage varieties. They may even be regarded as varieties we have adopted over many years.

Carignan was brought to Israel in the 1870s by the Mikveh Israel Agricultural School. It arrived even before Baron Rothschild began to invest in Israeli

wine beginning in the 1880s. Colombard came to Israel in the 1970s. Both types of grapes are better known for high yields and large quantities than for quality. However, in the 2000s and 2010s, respectively, Carignan and Colombard were reborn as good quality wines well suited to Israel. Vitkin Winery and Mony Winery were the initial pioneers that made us all wake up and take another look at these varieties. Kudos to Assaf Paz of Vitkin Winery, and Sam Soroka, then-winemaker of Mony.

Wine is a combination of a person, a place, and grape varieties. I can hardly wait for the wines made by Carbone from Colombard and Carignan, grown at Kibbutz Be'eri and made at Be'eri Winery.

Judging by his Be'eri Chardonnay, he has nothing to worry about – and as consumers, we are eager for more. Hamas hates democracy, liberalism, and the West with the fundamentalist fervor with which they hate Jews and Israelis. They are also fanatically anti-alcohol and wine.

Wine represents life, and life is stronger than death. A new winery rising from the ruins, a part of Be'eri reborn and rebuilt, that is what I would call total victory.

L'chaim! To life! □

The writer is a wine trade veteran and a winery insider turned wine writer. He has advanced Israeli wine for 38 years and is known as the "English voice of Israeli wine." adammontefiore.com