



Family, food, fun... and wine



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

There are three Tishbis in my story. First was Michael Chamiletzki, who brought the family to a new country and the new profession of grape growers. Then there was Yonatan Tishbi, who built the family winery, and finally Golan Tishbi, who brought the winery to become the unique culinary visitors center it is today.

In the late 1880s the story began when Michael and Malka Chamiletzki emigrated from Lithuania and settled in Zichron Ya'acov on the southern slopes of Mount Carmel. The new settler farmers planted every shrub, tree or crop that could possibly grow in the stony soil. By trial and error they found that grapes grew well. This would not have been a surprise to someone reading the Bible or looking around the Eastern Mediterranean.

On the basis of this, Baron Edmond de Rothschild decided to found an Israeli wine industry. He sent the Chamiletzkis to the satellite, overflow village of Shefeya, northeast of Zichron, to plant vines and manage vineyards.

In 1925 the national poet of Israel, Haim Nahman Bialik, was visiting the Chamiletzkis, and he gave them a new Hebraized name, Tishbi, an acronym for the Hebrew words meaning "a resident of Shefeya in the Land of Israel." So the name changed to Tishbi, but the family profession continued through the generations.

Fast-forward to 1984 and Yonatan Tishbi sold his grapes to Agudat Hacormim, the grape growers cooperative, a.k.a. Carmel Mizrahi. At that time Carmel

went through a severe financial crisis, nearly crashing and bringing the edifice of Israeli wine tumbling with it. (Carmel was then 75% of the market.) The upshot of this was that the growers did not get paid.

Yonatan therefore decided in 1985 to go it alone and form his own winery. He had observed how in Italy winegrowers were not dependent on anyone and used their own grapes to make wine, and thought there was no reason for him not to do the same. He called his winery Baron Wine Cellars, in honor of Baron Rothschild.

It was a courageous move and Tishbi was a pioneer. Later the boutique winery boom would follow. This was made up of domestic wine-making hobbyists (viz., Eli Ben Zaken of Castel) deciding to found a winery and established growers (like Ronnie James of Tzora) deciding to do the same. However, Tishbi was the first, and he never really received the credit for what was then a brave move, with success far from assured.

The name was soon changed to Tishbi Winery, and a number of well-known wine-makers contributed to different stages of its development. Names such as Yair Margalit (Margalit Winery), Ed Salzberg (who used to work for Barkan), Arie Neshet (Tabor), Lewis Pasco (who used to work for Recanati) and Asaf Paz (Vitkin) passed through.

Tishbi Winery was initially well known particularly for its white wines, but it was a brandy initiative that brought the winery international fame. In 1996 a Jonathan Tishbi three-year-old brandy won the trophy of Best Brandy Worldwide at the International Wine and Spirits Competition in London.

Yonatan, in collaboration with Sydney Back of Backsberg Winery in South Africa, had bought a Rémy Martin pot still to make quality brandy in Israel. The

success was immediate, and I was at that time acting as export manager for Tishbi Winery, as it was part of a distribution agreement with the Golan Heights Winery, whom I worked for.

I therefore found myself sitting in a hired dinner jacket and bow tie at a gala dinner in the Guildhall in London. There Yonatan Tishbi proudly received his award, and the Golan Heights Winery received a trophy for wine, too, to make it a doubly memorable evening.

The Tishbi Winery grew to a million bottles annually and was well established as the second-largest family winery in Israel. And family it was. Yonatan was the manager, Nili (Yonatan's wife) looked after the visitors center, son Micha, a lawyer by day, did the labels, and the other son, Golan, was involved with operations.

In those days there was the beginning of the food revolution that was to follow. You could sit under the pergola at the winery and have cheese and salad and homemade pita. Then Yonatan's daughter founded her Oshra Tishbi Fine Food, including high-quality jams, preserves and jellies and olive oil. She also opened the Tishbi Zichron Restaurant at the Tishbi house on the central street of Zichron.

In 2001 a wine-maker left without warning, leaving the responsibility in the hands of Golan Tishbi. He became the wine-maker almost by default but was always hands-on and observant, and he had been around wine all his life. He took time to study in New Zealand and since then has steered the ship.

Golan is a redhead and he appears to be brusque and curt to outsiders, but is also warm and friendly to those who know him.

Now, to plant vines is relatively simple and to make wine is not that difficult. What is hard is to market



THE TISHBI Restaurant where 'Each man shall sit under his fig tree and vine.' (Ran Biran)

THE TISHBI Winery Visitors' Center where one can taste chocolate and of course, wine. (Courtesy)

FATHER AND SON – Yonatan (right) and Golan Tishbi. (Anatoly Krimansky)



(Courtesy)

Tishbi Chardonnay Single Vineyard 2017

Varietal Chardonnay from the Tishbis' own Zichron Ya'acov vineyard. The wine shows soft tropical fruit, pineapple, pear and has a good but not intrusive acidity. Nicely balanced and pleasant. NIS 55.

Tishbi Judea Red Single Vineyard 2015

A "field blend" wine from Givat Yeshayahu. It is made from Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petite Sirah and Petit Verdot. Grown, harvested, fermented and aged together. Interesting. The wine has restrained blackberry fruit and fruity flavor with hints of coffee and a hard, chewy texture that cleans the palate. NIS 130.

Tishbi Cabernet Sauvignon Single Vineyard 2015

A single vineyard wine from Bracha Valley in Gush Etzion. The wine has a ripe fruit nose with something savory (olives?) in the background. It has a good, full flavor, soft tannins and a clean acidity. NIS 85.

and sell it. Twenty years ago a winery's main work was totally within the boundaries of the winery. Today the crucial work is beyond the gates of the winery. Golan made decisions that set his winery apart. He avoided fawning to what he saw as an unrewarding wine press, stopped sending his wines to competitions and declined the heavy discounting necessary to gain favor with the supermarket chains. Instead, he decided to build a unique Tishbi wine experience at the winery.

He brought in Valrhona Chocolates, one of the world's more famous brands of quality chocolates. This was smart. People love chocolate and enjoy tasting wine, and Golan decided to put them together and offer a unique tasting experience, matching chocolates to wine.

He built a pizza oven and upgraded the restaurant, bringing in a master chef from Austria. Chef Gunther Biedermann can be seen in a tall chef's hat that would be more appropriate in the Tel Aviv Hilton than in a family winery. It is a dairy restaurant showing Israel's finest ingredients, but in a relaxed and informal setting.

He founded a fully equipped boulangerie, producing artisan breads using Le Panyol pastry ovens imported from France. People come from far and wide to purchase them. Wine, bread and olive oil seem so appropriate for Israel, and they underline everything in Tishbi Winery.

The Tishbis did not forget the carnivores. They also introduced Hickory Smoked BBQ slow roasting ovens from Missouri. On Fridays, in between the bakery and warehouse, people queue up in their hundreds to listen to music, drink wine and gorge on the meat carved and served on plates or in pita. Golan's latest import is the gourmet confectionery from the French company Cruzilles, including delicious candied and crystallized fruit.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. I arrived early one morning to meet Golan at the beginning of the week and was astonished to see that the car park was full. The restaurant was full of people having breakfast. It has become a must-visit venue for tourists and the local haunt of many Israelis. As a result, a higher-than-average percentage of Tishbi wine sales are at the cellar door.

The dreamer in Golan continues. When we talked, he mentioned that his next project is to relaunch the restaurant and create a chocolate school.

In fact, he was so enthusiastic about all his subsidiary operations that I had to remind him after an hour-and-a-half to talk to me about wine!

Tishbi Winery in the early days was known for its Dry Muscat and Sauvignon Blanc. It was one of the first wineries to explore the desert with its single-vineyard wines from Sde Boker and one of the first to see the potential of Gush Etzion vineyards. Just about the only Ruby Cabernet you can taste in Israel is at Tishbi; also, it has originals such as its Barbera Zinfandel dessert wine. It was the first to see the potential and versatility of the French Colombard grape, using it for distilling brandy, making traditional-method sparkling wine, and in innovative blend French Riesling. It sells wines under three labels: Tishbi, Tishbi Estate (including single vineyards) and the prestige label Jonathan Tishbi Special Reserve.

With the help of brother Micha, the Tishbis have also upgraded their family vineyards, as the historic Mount Carmel wine region makes a comeback. Even the famous Margalit Winery recently planted vineyards in Zichron Ya'acov. As Golan Tishbi told me, "Rothschild was in the wine business.... He knew what he was doing" when he chose the southern slopes of Mount Carmel as the center of the Israeli wine industry he created.

Today the winery offers fill-up-a-bottle stations for both red wine and olive oil. Bring your own bottle, and a wine will cost NIS 18, and a liter of olive oil NIS 50. So, too, the visitors' center offers wine from NIS 18 to NIS 500 for one of the old vintages of the Jonathan Tishbi Special Reserve from Sde Boker.

The family aspect permeates everything the Tishbis. Of course, the beautiful pottery displayed at the winery is produced by a member of the family, in this case Golan's talented wife, Karen. She is a potter and ceramic artist.

Today Yonatan is still the CEO, but Golan is in charge of the winery's heartbeat. He makes wine but also peddles a unique combination of food, family and fun. ■

The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years and has been referred to as the "English voice of Israeli wine." www.adammontefiore.com