

Israel with a sparkle



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Whether we call it New Year's Eve or Sylvester, this is exactly the time for a party. The wine that symbolizes happiness, success and celebration is sparkling wine. Though it is a style of wine that has taken Israelis time to learn to appreciate, sparkling wines have become very popular here.

The number of imported sparklers, mainly Cava from Spain or Prosecco from Italy, has increased dramatically. In fact, anything with bubbles is "in." In restaurants and bars throughout Israel, people are ordering Cava, which has become the Israeli slang for any sparkling wine. Champagne is the ultimate expression of the art, which is replicated by "traditional method" sparkling wines made elsewhere. This means the second fermentation, which produces the bubbles, occurs in the same bottle in which it is eventually sold.

The history of sparkling wine here matches the story and development of Israeli wine as a whole. In the 1960s and '70s, Carmel produced genuine traditional-method sparkling wines. It was an expensive undertaking needing a special workforce, as everything was done by hand. There was no market for expensive sparkling wine in those days, so they eventually stopped production. The old sparkling wine racks (pupitres) that could be seen around Rishon Lezion Cellars gave a hint of a sparkling wine past. Now Rishon is no longer. The winery lies empty and forlorn, turned into a car park no one uses. Tragically, much wine memorabilia, including historical documents and artifacts, went with it.

In those days, the main wine flying the flag for Israel was President's Sparkling, made primarily from Colombard grapes. It was initially made by the traditional method, and later by the charmat process. It was sold abroad as Brut Cuvée. Confusingly, and this symbolized the old Israeli wine industry, Carmel sold President as a traditional method sparkling wine for years, when it was really made by the cheaper tank method. This damaged the category.

The new Israel wine industry was symbolized by the Golan Heights Winery, who were the pioneers of quality wine in Israel. This was especially true of sparkling wines. In 1991, a young bespectacled winemaker from California joined the Golan Heights Winery as assistant winemaker. Showing the planning, seriousness and professionalism that characterized the winery, they sent him to the Jacquesson Champagne House for six months to learn the secrets of the "Champenoise." The young man was called Victor Schoenfeld, who in 1992 was appointed chief winemaker. He is still

the winemaker there 26 years later.

The Golan Heights Winery then invested in all the modern equipment to make traditional method sparkling wine. This time, the process was mechanized and gyro-pallets were used instead of manual remuage. Their efforts resulted in three traditional-method sparkling wines: Yarden Blanc de Blancs, Yarden Brut and Gamla Rosé.

At the 1996 International Wine & Spirit Competition in London, Israeli sparkling wine arrived on the international stage. Yarden Blanc de Blancs, then a non-vintage wine, won the Trophy for The Best Bottle Fermented Sparkling Wines at the International Wine and Spirits Competition in London. It was a seminal moment, because it was international recognition for Israel but also illustrated that the Golan Heights Winery way for investing in quality and not cutting corners paid off big time. I was proud to be there at the gala dinner at the Guildhall in London when the trophy presentation was made.

This high-profile award was repeated in 2003 when Yarden Blanc de Blancs 1997, by then a vintage wine, won the same trophy. Then, in honor of winning this trophy twice, the winery was invited to sponsor the sparkling wine competition at the IWSC, in itself an honor. It became known as The Yarden Trophy for Best Bottle Fermented Sparkling Wine. This international success gave the Yarden Blanc de Blancs an international name.

TODAY, PRESIDENT'S, Brut Cuvée, Yarden Brut and Gamla Rosé are history. They are no longer made, but the Golan Heights Winery still produces three sparkling wines of the highest standard: the aforementioned Yarden Blanc de Blancs, Yarden Rosé and Gamla Brut. All the wines are produced from fruit grown in the Golan Heights, Israel's coolest wine region. They are all made strictly according to the traditional method, including pressing of whole clusters and secondary fermentation in the bottle. Before disgorging, each bottle is aged for a period on its tirage yeast.

If I may use basketball terminology, wine lovers may put many Yarden red and white wines in the first five of similar wine categories in Israel. However, if we are talking about Yarden Blanc de Blancs in relation to other Israeli sparkling wines, then we are talking about Michael Jordan. Delicate, creamy and elegant with great purity and a citrusy finish. This is the finest

SPARKLING WINES from the Golan Heights Winery.
(Photos: Courtesy)



expression of the art of sparkling wine in Israel and as good as many champagnes.

Other sparkling wines are produced by the likes of Carmel, Pelter, Tishbi and Teperberg. Some are made by the traditional method and others are made by the Charmat process. It is a category full of new interest as other wineries rumored to be making sparkling wine for the future include Ella Valley, Psagot and Sphera. Arguably, the best bargain is the Gamla Brut, which is very dry, without the fragrance and finesse of the Blanc de Blancs, but represents great value. However, it is a category that often falls between two stools. People want either real champagne, or the cheapest fizz (made by what I call the Coca-Cola method.)

There is no lack of authentic champagnes to choose, if that is your choice. The Champagne House Drappier is in its eighth generation as a family-owned and managed winery. The Drappier Carte D'Or represents quality and consistency. It has aromas of pear backed by brioche and is clean and refreshing. A newcomer to champagne is the world's No. 1 wine family, the Rothschilds. The three famous wine branches of the family (owners of Chateau Clarke, Chateau Lafite and Chateau Mouton) have combined for the first time to produce Champagne Barons de Rothschild. The Rothschild Brut and Rose are both outstanding, worthy of the name. Both Drappier and Rothschild make high-quality authentic champagnes and they also make kosher cuvees for the Jewish community.



OPENING A bottle of authentic sparkling wine is dangerous. The pressure in a bottle is similar to the pressure in the tire of a double-decker bus. The cork also is a projectile that can fit into the eye socket and do untold damage. So take heed and beware. Hold the bottle at 45° and be sure it is not pointed at anyone. Gently undo the wire surrounding the cork, keeping a finger on top of the cork. Hold the cork and gently turn the bottle. Control the effect of the pressure so it comes out with an erotic sigh rather than an uncontrolled pop.

Use only flute or tulip glasses. Pour gently and steadily with the glass on a slant, so it does not froth over. Most people do not have proper sparkling wine glasses, but don't panic. Serving the wine in a white wine glass is OK. Nowadays, with specialist champagnes, it is trendy to serve wine in a glass with a larger opening than has been de rigueur in the past, to make the most of the aromas. Just avoid the flat, coupe glasses, which are more suitable for cocktails or ice cream.

Sparkling wines are traditionally served as an aperitif. The French serve it bone dry and young with the pronounced acidity at its fiercest. The Brits, large consumers of champagne, serve it with a little more bottle age to bring out the complexity. It is often their preferred choice at the end of a banquet after many courses and wines.

Sparkling wines go with anything that are good with white wines (and are perfect with sushi). I have never found it out of place drinking throughout a meal. You can toast anything with a sparkling wine. It is a style of wine that simply makes you feel better. So at the turn of the year, I recommend you spend time with your family and friends, drink the sparkling wine of your choice and make a *l'haim* for health, wealth and happiness for the coming year. ■

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CHAMPAGNE BARONS de Rothschild – a Champagne of the highest quality.

However, any sparkling wine will do. Choose one to match your budget and taste, not one designed to impress someone else! It may surprise you, even though I am considered a wine snob, I love Lambrusco. Wine can be fun and for drinking... it does not always have to have a medal and story. Sometimes we like to drink rather than just taste. If you like Lambrusco, as my late wife did, you won't be made to feel inferior by me. Giacobazzi is one of the better ones in the market. Alternatively, there is no end of Moscatos. These are fruity wines that people love, simply because they are tasty. There is always a debate whether they are really sparkling wines because they are frizzante, or dessert wines, because they are sweet. In fact, because they are low alcohol, they are not truly categorized as wines. The Tabor Har Moscato is arguably the best example. It is grapey, flavorful, lightly sparkling with a delicate sweetness, but there are many others. There is nothing wrong with drinking Moscato, either. However, if it is bubbles you want, you may find something like Martini Asti more appropriate. It has the same aromas as Moscato but has more qualities of a sparkling wine. These remind us that wine can be fun, make you smile and should not be taken too seriously.

(LEFT TO right) Rothschild Brut Champagne; Drappier Carte d'Or Champagne; Tabor Har Moscato; Martini Asti; Giacobazzi Lambrusco.

