



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**T**rying to explain kashrut in wine to the non-kosher market is difficult. Some things sound almost voodoo to the non-Jewish ear. I have always thought that selling the kosher concept would be easier if our vineyards were self-sustainable. Caring for spirituality and the environment go together, and in my view one strengthens the other.

I sometimes explain kosher is like a glorified ISO system, where the origin and source of everything used in the winemaking process has to be documented and verified. That sounds understandable. In the same way there are those that believe vegetarianism and veganism sit well with the spirit of kashrut and Jewish ethics, I also believe sustainable viticulture is a natural partner.

To my regret, Israel, so advanced in many ways, has not adopted what I call ethical viticulture in a major way. No doubt there are a few “organically grown” vineyards though (to differentiate from “organically made” wine). The best example is the Yarden Chardonnay from Odem Vineyard on the Golan Heights. The chardonnay is grown organically, and the wine has won many awards.

There are only two Israeli wineries producing organic wine, Lotem in the Galilee and Neot Smadar, near Eilat. The paradox is that whereas the consumer is prepared to pay more for organic vegetables, the same is not true for wine, especially if the general wine consumer is not enamored of organic wines. I suppose I agree. If making organic wines is a means to an end,

rather than the end itself, it is pointless making holier-than-thou wines if the result does not produce better quality.

The efforts and commitment by Tabor Winery to convert its vineyards to sustainable viticulture is extremely encouraging. This is a praiseworthy initiative and statement of intent by a large winery and its example should be followed by others.

In another encouraging move, a small group of wineries have formed “Netto Wine,” a self-regulated consortium espousing something approaching natural wines. Their slogan is “fewer additives, more transparency.” This group was founded by Rami Naaman of Naaman Winery and wineries of the caliber of Bar-Maor and Sea Horse are part of it. However, apart from wildly cheering the initiatives by Rami Naaman, Tabor Winery and Odem Vineyard, among others, we can’t say that there is a deluge of new thinking in Israeli wine.

For external inspiration, I was therefore pleased to come across the wines of the pioneering Salcheto Winery in Tuscany, Italy. Of course, the first thing I met was the wines. If I had not thought they were good, I would have investigated no further. What they did in the winery and vineyard would be irrelevant for me if the wines were no good. However, the wines were enticing. I only later learned of the way the wines were made. After all, it is the objective of every winemaker to make quality wines. It is slightly missing the point to be a winemaker driven by a vision, only to find the wines are undrinkable.

Salcheto Winery is situated in the village of Montepulciano in Tuscany, 120 km. southeast of Florence. The word *salco* means willow tree, which is often to be

found near water. Over the years, the branches of the willow were used to bind vines. Salcheto is the name of a stream that springs from the town of Montepulciano and traverses through the valley of this wine country. The stylish labels of Salcheto’s wines feature a lone willow tree.

The winery produces 300,000 bottles a year from organically grown and bio-dynamic vineyards. The grapes are harvested manually, vinification is sulfite-free and only indigenous yeasts are used. Combining tradition and modernity, the wines are aged in combination of botte (large oak casks usually made from Slovenian oak) and small oak barrels.

The winery was born 30 years ago. Michele Manelli became involved in 1997 and has since then plotted and experimented to both improve the expressive nature of the wines, but also to make the vineyards and winery cathedrals to preserving the environment. He wanted to save the planet but believed in starting at home.

Manelli is the unlikely-looking hero of this story. He does not look like someone out to save the world. He has long hair in the way the Beatles were thought to have long hair in the 1960s, and a drooping, unkempt Mexican-style mustache. An Italian Frank Zappa would be a good description! His dark-rimmed glasses give him a slightly apologetic, scholastic air. He has the constant diffident look that he is about to shrug his shoulders French style. That is at least until you hear him speak and his beliefs come out in a torrent.

You should never judge a book by its cover. This unassuming person has had the drive to create a revolution – first in the vineyard, then at the winery. However this was not enough for him, because he is



### Chianti Colli Senesi 2015

Mainly made from Sangiovese with a small amount of local varieties Mammolo and Caniolo, but the taste is very Sangiovese. The wine has aromas of sour cherry, strawberry and plum with an earthy character, prominent tannins and good refreshing acidity. This is a great value wine for those looking for the essence of Chianti.



### Rosso di Montepulciano 2015

Made from Prugnolo Gentile, the local clone of Sangiovese balanced with a little Caniolo and Merlot. It is soft, fruity, quite plush, with a fruit-driven finish.



### Nobile de Montepulciano 2013

Also made from Prugnolo Gentile. Aged in a combination of large and small oak barrels. The wine is deep with aromas of bitter cherry and blackcurrant. It has a mouth-filling chewy feel, with a well-defined balanced finish. A classy wine.

encouraging and leading others to follow in his path and spreading the word to other like-minded wineries in the region.

Today the winery is a model of environmental efficiency and technological innovation. It functions totally off the grid (disconnected from any power distribution) and uses 54% less energy than conventional wineries. The cooling, heating, water and energy supply are all catered for by the winery's internal operation. There are no lightbulbs at this winery. All energy is created on the premises, including that necessary for cooling, and they collect and recycle all their water needs. Even the stainless steel tanks have been designed to preclude the need for pump-overs.

The winery is a blur of science and innovation, but the aesthetics of the winery convey beauty, authenticity and tradition. The Salcheto Enoteca (the Italian word used to denote a quality wine shop) is situated in the heart of the cellar. No kashrut restrictions here. Visitors are encouraged to see everything. They can taste while enjoying a brunch using only local and seasonal ingredients.

Then there is the Salcheto Winehouse, a 13th-century farmhouse that was once a watchtower of the surrounding valleys. There are nine rooms, allowing guests to enjoy the Tuscan experience and the beautiful countryside. Hot tubs are available in the garden, powered by natural wood heat, of course. It is agritourism, made famous in Italy, at its best.

Winewise, it was important for Manelli to make wines that showcase Sangiovese and that celebrate the variety. He wanted to avoid the thin, harsh, tannic, acidic wines of yesteryear and the overripe, high-alco-

hol, oaky wines brought to Tuscany by the New World ideas, Parkerization and international varieties. In his words, he looks for wines that are "fresh, fragrant, accessible and soft."

He also had a similar message for consumers. To simplify the marketing, the wine names were simplified from the long Italian traditional names to the more succinct "Chianti," "Rosso" and "Nobile." Even a newly designed bottle has been unveiled. The bottle shape is reminiscent of the history of Tuscan wine, but it is also the lightest and most ecological on the market. A blend of history, innovation and quality.

How does our environmental hero, with greenhouse gases and carbon footprints on his mind, spend his spare time? Revving up his motorbike, which is his other passion in life, and riding fast through the vineyards! This is his outlet and I can't think of many better ways to see and enjoy the most beautiful wine region on earth! As this farmer-artist-scientist explained to me: "The world is big, but life is short!"

Three Salcheto wines have been newly imported to Israel and are as yet only available in restaurants. They represent a refreshing innovative choice to enliven the meal experience and make the wine selection both better value and more rewarding.

They are an example that wines from organically grown and biodynamic vineyards, made organically in an environmentally friendly winery, can also be of high quality. ■

*The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is known as the "English voice of Israeli wine."*  
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