

TZOHAR CERTIFICATE for Mika Winery on the Southern Golan Heights (top). The organization inspects kashrut strictly according to Halacha. (Tzohar)



Separation, not division

MORDECHAI COHEN (R), the legendary 'masgiach' of Carmel's Zichron Ya'acov Cellars. (Carmel Winery)



MOSES MONTEFIORE was religious, adhered to Jewish dietary laws – but was the wine he drank kosher? (Adam Montefiore)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The essence of kashrut in wine may be found in the terms *yayin nesech* and *stam yeinam*. Both types of wine are prohibited to those who adhere to the Jewish dietary laws. *Yayin nesech* is a wine poured in a libation by idol worshippers. *Stam yeinam* is a wine that is owned, touched, or moved by non-Jews.

Quite often I am asked if a small winery I have written about is kosher or not. Often I answer that although the winery it is not kosher, the wine is made by a Jew who is not an idol worshiper. My reply is meant to be tongue in cheek, but if we are talking *tachlis*, then this sort of winery is not covered by either prohibition. In fact, kashrut in wine has been a movable feast, changing over the years.

In the 19th century, there was no kashrut infrastructure for wine – you just bought your wine from someone you knew to be a good Jew. Wines were sold in small barrels. Glass bottles were scarce and expensive. There were no labels, no kosher stamps or certificates.

In 1848, the Shor family founded Zion Winery in the Old City's Muslim Quarter. Its folklore says that families used to send a daughter of the household to the winery to fill the only bottle they had (parents were working, boys were studying). When the young girl walked back home, she would wrap the bottle carefully in a cloth so as not to inflame the Arab street, as Muslims were prohibited alcohol, and not to render the wine unkosher by prying eyes.

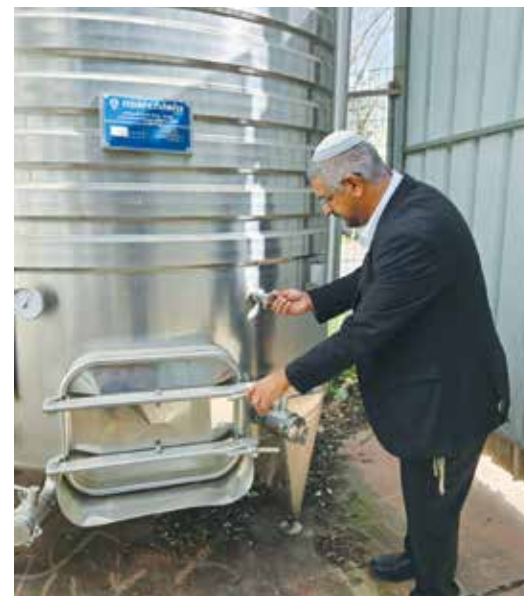
In my own family, Sir Moses Montefiore was so religious he would travel with his own *shochet*. He was a wine lover. In common with the trend in Britain at the time, his tipple was port. What a British gentleman would do was ship a pipe of port (550 liters), and then mature it in his private cellar. From there, he could fill a bottle and bring it to the table. Montefiore drank a bottle a day, famously enjoying three glasses just before he died at the ripe old age of nearly 101.

He was strictly observant in the food he ate, but I often wonder if and how the wine he drank was kosher. Maybe he arranged for a converso or crypto Jew to make it in Porto, Portugal. Alternatively, according to Maimonides, if a spoonful of honey was added to the barrel, this would render the status of the wine as though it had been boiled (*yayin mevushal*). Easy to do, and it would not affect the taste. In Britain, there was a custom that religious Jews would drink non-kosher brandy because it was no longer wine. Possibly port, a wine fortified with brandy, was considered in this category.

There was also a certain laxity or flexibility about *stam yeinam* among the rabbis in Italy that lasted from the 16th century to the mid-20th century. Of course, the Montefiore family came from Italy, and Moses Montefiore was born in Livorno. So it is possible that he followed the Italian rite with regard to wine; but it is a conundrum, and I don't have the answer.

However, the story illustrates that the kashrut interpretation was not monolithic but differed according to the period, person, place, and local customs.

It wasn't until the early 20th century that the kashrut of wine was formalized. Rabbinical involvement started when individual rabbis, to support their mea-



RABBI ELAD MOSHE of Tzohar is responsible for checking agricultural laws are strictly adhered to them. Here, he is visiting the Kerem Barak Winery in the Judean Foothills. (Tzohar)

ger salaries, would recommend brands. The advent of labels for wines hastened this, allowing a kosher stamp to be added.

In Israeli wineries, the stringency of kashrut has changed and, in fact, has become stricter. In the Carmel Mizrahi winery, the symbol of kosher wine worldwide for over 100 years, a Jewish but nonreligious winemaker would once be able to put on a *kippah* and go into the winemaking engine room and touch everything without any restriction. The most famous winery worker was David Ben-Gurion, who worked in the production part of the Rishon Le Zion Wine Cellars in 1907, and he was not religious by any means. The experience did nothing for his appreciation of wine. The smell of the wine during harvest made him feel nauseous and, as a result, he could not drink wine for years afterward.

Things began to become stricter in the 1980s due to a combination of reasons. The new emphasis on quality dry wine led by the Golan Heights Winery; the rise of Shas as a political entity; and the realization that kashrut supervision was rife with earning potential resulted in a new competitiveness among kashrut authorities. They became like brands in an overcrowded marketplace. Everyone would have the certification they would favor, and large wineries started hedging their bets by having a number of kashrut certificates as opposed to just one from the Rabbinat.

I have had different interactions with *mashgichim* (religious supervisors), illustrating differences of interpretation. I remember once being terribly concerned when a visitor to the winery brushed against a barrel, only to be reassured by the religious supervisor not to worry. If the wine does not actually move, it is not an issue. On another occasion, I remember an assistant *mashgiach* bellowing at a VIP guest when he thought he was about to touch a barrel. It was as though the wrath of God Himself were among us!

The most famous example of wine being disqualified from being kosher was at Carmel in 1995. Yair Margalit took the wine, and the Chardonnay became very well known as Margalit Winery's first white wine, which was sold as a non-kosher wine. Of course, these issues happened at every winery, but most of

the juicy stories cannot be told.

If kashrut seems stricter in the Holy Land, the situation in Europe seems more easygoing. Once, a kosher batch made in a non-kosher winery was separated by tarpaulins and padlocks, and without the *mashgiach* you could not get near it. Today, the tanks and barrels holding kosher wine lie alongside those containing non-kosher wine. The only way to identify them is by the masking tape, put on in an amateurish [cartoonist] Heath Robinson way, over the tap or bung.

OF COURSE, it is not just kashrut in wine that has become stricter in Israel; every aspect of the religion has. This was part of the reason that Tzohar was founded in 1995 by Rabbi David Stav, chief rabbi of Shoham, after the assassination of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. Tzohar is Israel's largest private alternative to the Chief Rabbinat.

The intention was to offer a religious outlet to Israelis with no political presence or government connection. Rabbi Stav has said that Tzohar's aim is not to make people more observant but to expose people to the beauty of Judaism. Tzohar has done praiseworthy and effective work by making life cycle ceremonies, such as weddings and bar mitzvahs, more friendly and welcoming, but always following Jewish law.

The next step was that it entered the kashrut business. The kashrut branch of Tzohar was developed in 2018 to firmly uphold *Halacha* in ways that will help more people to observe Jewish tradition and embrace their Jewish identities. As they say at Tzohar, "Our strong belief is that religious practice must not be a reason for division in Israeli society." Amen to that! It has brought non-kosher businesses into the fold and supported those who feel disenfranchised and cynical about the regular kashrut channels.

No doubt, Tzohar does a very important job in Israel. Its rabbis are Torah scholars and Orthodox without concession to modernity. It attempts to narrow the schism between religious and nonreligious Jews by making Judaism more accessible for Israelis.

I recently met Rabbi Emmanuel Guedj, the director of Kashrut Tzohar; and Rabbi Elad Moshe, the rabbi of the Tzohar

Kashrut Department. They were so interesting and informative, with a positive attitude of trying to help rather than preferring to slap down. They were inclusive instead of being exclusive, and seeing the glass as half full rather than half empty. They avoid name calling at all costs, no matter what mud is slung at them by those who should know better. I left the meeting encouraged and impressed.

What is a kosher wine according to Tzohar? Firstly, Tzohar follows the agricultural laws to the letter. The practices of *orla*, *kil'ei hakerem*, *shmita*, and *trumot* and *ma'aserot* are followed. These may be described as the oldest codified wine laws. Furthermore, only kosher ingredients may be used in the winemaking process. All these requirements are followed meticulously by Tzohar.

Where there is a bump in the road is in the area of Shabbat observance. The handling of the wine and machinery in most kosher wineries must be done only by Shabbat-observant Jews. Originally, it was decreed that if a non-Jew came in contact with the wine, then it should be regarded as non-kosher. Over the years, this restriction was extended to include non-observant Jews as well. Tzohar believes the original *Halacha* was correct. It was intended to create separation (between Jews and non-Jews), not division (between Jews). There is a difference between those who desecrate the Sabbath in a demonstrative manner to defy tradition, and those who honor the Sabbath by sanctifying it and lighting candles.

For its compass, Tzohar goes back to the sages, and both the *Shulchan Aruch* and Rav Kook. Its ruling enables small wineries without the finances to go kosher and receive a Tzohar certificate. Some of the wineries certified by Tzohar are Kerem Barak; Family Baum; Hayogev; Livne; Mika; Roglit; Sde Boker; Scoria; Tsoof; and Terra Uma. In total, there are 25 wineries in the Tzohar program.

Rabbi Yisrael Samet, of the Tzohar Rabbinical Council, has said: "Ensuring proper kashrut is a complex effort requiring deep insight into *Halacha* and utmost respect for our traditions – and we have never wavered from that commitment, nor do we shy away from full transparency."

SNOW R. Shai is a talented and provocative filmmaker. His 2021 documentary *Holy Wine* addresses the issues of kashrut in Israeli wine as a mirror of Israeli society.

I paraphrase the statements of the two major figures in the film, Eli Ben-Zaken of Domaine du Castel and Yair Margalit of Margalit Winery.

Ben-Zaken explained that he decided to make his wine kosher because he wanted all of the Jewish people to be able to enjoy his wine, but he later added that when he is forbidden to take a sample of his own wine, it makes him feel like a secondhand Jew.

Margalit decried the "caste" system (I can't remember his exact words) that made him an inferior Jew. Just for the record, he produces non-kosher wines, but he is Jewish and not an idol worshiper. There is a certain disconnect that even though Margalit would be welcomed as a Jew to make up a *minyan* and can receive an *aliyah* in the synagogue, he is not considered Jewish enough as a winemaker.

Tzohar is a valuable addition to the spectrum of kashrut supervision. Of course, it is a free world. You follow the *hechsher* that is valid for you.

Simon S. Jacob is creator and host of the wonderful *Kosher Terroir* podcast. In a recent episode, he interviewed Rabbi Yehoshua Grunstein about Tzohar's attitude toward winemaking. The discussion delved into questions about Jewish identity, inclusion, and the purpose of religious authority. Anyone who is skeptical or wants to learn more should listen to it (www.kosherterroir.com).

Jacob is Orthodox, a wine maverick, and maven, whom I respect greatly. I asked him if he regards the Tzohar wineries as kosher, and if he would drink their wine.

He answered, "I am tired of all the division. I love what Tzohar is doing. In the spirit of *shalom bayit*, and especially after Oct. 7, the answer is yes and yes."

If we ever reach the nirvana of "Live and let live," we will have come a long way. ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 38 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com