

# From little acorns



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

I am sitting here, finger punching my laptop while sipping Lahat Adom 2024. That is the name in English, not a rouge or red in sight. The wine has a faint chill on it from 20 minutes in the fridge. It is mainly made with Syrah, a variety that seems so at home in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. Just so it is not alone, it has a splash or two of Cabernet Sauvignon, which adds structure and a framework, but not too much.

It has a juicy, fruity nose, primarily of red fruit, but not in a jammy way. It has spice, peppery notes, and is the opposite of a full-bodied wine, but is not exactly light. It is full of content, interwoven like a braid, so that complexity, fruit, flavor, and length intertwine.

Yet, the result is a harmonious, well-balanced, refreshing wine with great drinkability. It is the antithesis of the Israeli wines we have become used to. It is a wine that speaks Hebrew, or rather modern Israeli.

I have followed the Lahat Winery since the first vintage in 2012. I have been to numerous tastings and heard owner Itay Lahat presenting his wines quite a few times. What I had not done is visited his vineyards, which gives an ultimate insight. See a vineyard, and you feel you are climbing into a wine. It's like peeking behind the curtains of a dressing room; you see everything. So, I invited myself to visit and drove up to the Western Galilee.

I knew about the terrible time Galilee vintners have experienced since the Hamas-led invasion on Oct. 7, 2023. During 2023-2024, they had to prune and harvest under fire. Visitors' centers were closed. Winery employees and their families were evacuated. The danger arose again during the first and second wars with Iran. Galilee wineries merit special support. They have been through a very tough time.



WINEMAKER, CONSULTANT, educator Itay Lahat, a leading and influential figure on Israeli wine scene. (Photos: Lahat Winery)

LAHAT WINERY was a start-up winery founded 14 years ago by winemaker Itay Lahat. He makes his wines at Kishor Winery, for whom he is also the winemaking consultant. It is no doubt one of our finest small wineries in the country, and Lahat is one of the more interesting and knowledgeable wine folk to talk to.

Lahat's first smell of wine was at the Rishon LeZion Wine Cellars as a teenager. With his friend Golan Flam (the winemaker of Flam Winery), he would help out at the winery for fun and to earn money on holidays. Golan's father, Israel Flam, was the head winemaker of Carmel Mizrahi.

Once Lahat decided on a wine future, his wine career may be divided into four stages. The first was as an enthusiastic newbie, when he began working for the late Shlomo Cohen at the Israel Wine Institute in Rehovot. There, they used to make experimental wines from different varieties and clones, and from different vineyards.

The main weekly event was when the great and good people of the Israeli wine scene would come for tastings, ostensibly in the interest of research, but in fact, the gatherings were also a good opportunity to catch up with friends. Most of the people there were on the Carmel side of the map.

From 1990-1992, I used to go to these tastings. Carmel's technical director, Freddie Stiller, Flam (then head winemaker of Rishon), the late Koby Gat (winemaker, agronomist, and wine educator) usually represented Carmel.

Winemakers Ed Salzberg (Tishbi and later Barkan) and Amram Surasky (Barkan, later Binyamina) were also there occasionally. Charles Loinger, the previous director of the Wine Institute, was a regular, as was wine-book author

Mimi Ben Yosef, and the late Prof. Ben Ami Bravdo (professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and world-renowned expert in viticulture research).

I went along as the new boy from Carmel, then responsible for wine education in hotels and restaurants.

In my day, the busy assistant was Sasson Ben Aharon. He went on to help Eli Ben-Zaken of Domaine du Castel in those crucial early days; he later became winemaker of Efrat and Binyamina, and is now at Mony Winery.

In 1992, I moved to the Golan Heights Winery. They were then already on a different plane.

They did not go to tastings at the Israel Wine Institute. So, by the time Lahat took over from Ben Aharon in 1995, I was no longer a guest at these cozy tastings.

THE BEAUTY of this job for the young Lahat is that he met everyone and had an opportunity to learn about everything, from the cutting to the final wine in the mini-micro-winery he managed. He came into contact with different varieties and regions, and rubbed shoulders with those who were then the wine establishment.

Lahat studied horticulture in Israel, and then oenology in Australia at the same time as Eran Goldwasser of the Yatir Winery, and joined a young, dynamic team at the Barkan Winery. This



AMPHORAE USE: Lahat Winery is a pioneer.



WINEMAKER LAHAT giving a tutored tasting of his wines.

was stage two: he began a promising career as an internationally trained winemaker at a very large winery. Under head winemaker Ed Saltzberg, there were Yotam Sharon, Avi Segal, and Lahat. Quite a team!

Lahat's job was to look after the vineyards as well as make the white wine. As such, he got to know winemaking in the fast lane and gained expertise and familiarity with the different terroirs throughout Israel.

Stage three was when he left the nest of corporate comfort, went solo, and became a wine consultant in 2008. At the time, it was a brave move. He began assisting a variety of small wineries to fulfill their dreams of making better-quality wines. Those who did not know him wrapped within his Barkan cloak, soon heard about his ability, calmness, common sense, and experience. He was soon considered the number one wine consultant in the country and in great demand.

Then we arrive at the current stage, when Lahat stopped making wine for others and decided to establish his own winery. For the first time, he was making wine for himself. In 2012, he launched a white: Lahat Lavan, made from Roussanne and Viognier.

It showed a direction: Mediterranean varieties, Rhone-style blends from Israeli terroir. It was a white wine that caught attention, with its focus was on texture rather than just aroma. It became the benchmark that showed the quality and direction of the new style of Israeli whites. Tzora Vineyards, Sphera, and Shvo Vineyards were others in this mini-revolution within a revolution. In 2014, he made his first Lahat Adom.

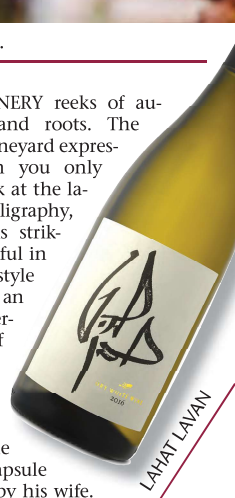
All this time, he maintained his high profile. When not consulting, he was teaching. He became a lecturer at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, among other venues, and organized the Tel Hai College Cellar Master program for several years. This has been an ongoing way to give back and pass on knowledge. Lahat has always been a superlative communicator.

LAHAT WINERY reeks of authenticity and roots. The wines are vineyard expressions. Then you only have to look at the label. The calligraphy, which looks strikingly beautiful in a Japanese style to me, is an artistic interpretation of a flame, the meaning of the word Lahat. The acorn on the label and capsule was drawn by his wife. It represents the oak trees adjacent to the vineyards.

The original European family names on the side of both parents, Laichter and Leibo, are immortalized in the name of the blends. In the beginning, Lahat made wines in the Jerusalem hills and on the Golan Heights, but through trial and error, gradually honing his art, he eventually focused on the Western Upper Galilee, west of Mount Meron. Being closer to the Mediterranean, the Western Galilee vineyards are windier with higher humidity, warmer nights, and cooler days than the Eastern Upper Galilee.

The *raison d'être* of Lahat Winery is based on a few principles. In Lahat's view, Israeli Chardonnay will never be Burgundy, and our Cabernet Sauvignon will never be Bordeaux. Therefore, he built his castle on Syrah and Roussanne and decided to focus on blends. This, he confidently and prophetically told me quite a few years ago, was the way forward for Israeli wines.

He believes in white wines that have complexity and content, and fresh reds with fruit, easy complexity, and drinkability. He has said that he makes reds like whites and whites like reds. Wine is a product of a person and a place. Lahat wraps them together and says that the terroir of the place is enhanced by



LAHAT'S ELKOSH vineyard, resplendent with wild spring flowers.

the personal terroir of the grower and winemaker.

When I visited him in his vineyard, he was explaining to a Thai worker about shoot thinning. He walked me around his Elkosh and Matat vineyards like a proud parent. His wines are expressions of these vines. Lahat Winery chose the Western Upper Galilee, in the foothills east of Mount Meron, at 600-700 m. above sea level, to grow his wine. As such, he became a frontline pioneer for the Western Galilee. Most wineries and vineyards are still concentrated in the Eastern Upper Galilee.

The Upper Galilee vineyards are among the most beautiful in Israel. Surrounded by oak and pine forests, it is a mountainous region of stony peaks and deep valleys. There is something positive about a winemaker in the vineyard. We always prefer winemakers who are farmers or growers who do it the hard way, rather than beginning the process with grapes received at the winery.

Everything is authentic, thought out, and rigorously measured. His carefully sculptured wines fit into his vision. The precision viticulture and finely nuanced winemaking are supported by the written and spoken word. Everything is presented with great flair to convey the marketing message, reflecting the style and perfectionism of someone with an obsessive attention to detail.

THE COMMERCIAL wines – the aforementioned Lahat Lavan and Lahat Adom, respectively made from Roussanne, Viognier, and Marsanne; and Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon – are the main wines of the winery. There are two

special-edition whites: Lahat Laichter, made from Roussanne, Grenache Blanc, and Marsanne; and a varietal Roussanne fermented in amphorae. Other reds include an enchanting Leibo GSM and a varietal Lahat Syrah.

The whites are full of content, with tension, tautness, and minerality, which have a capacity to age. The reds are relatively light, but not light in the literal sense of the word. They have fruit, spice, good acidity, and great drinkability. The newest kid on the block is Lahat Garrigue Rosé, which is about as far removed from a swimming pool rosé that you can get.

As we walked in the vineyard, he pointed out some wild za'atar. "That's garrigue," he said with a wink. The wine has a flavor-filled mineral texture. All the wines are gastronomic friendly. They are wines to enjoy with food.

Lahat is quiet, thoughtful, and a deep thinker. He is *debonair*, with *matinée* looks, always dresses smartly, and is a pioneer of Western Galilee Israeli Rhone-style wines and of fresh-style culinary wines.

In the wine trade, we celebrated Randal Grahm, known as the "Rhone Ranger" in California. Well, Lahat is Israel's very own Rhone Ranger!

Now back to Lahat Adom. It simply demands another *shluk* (sip.) As I learned from Lahat: What is a good wine? The answer: an empty bottle! ■

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