

ZION WINERY has been passed down from grandfather to son and son to grandson over 175 years.

(Photos: Courtesy Zion Winery)

ZION WINERY at Beit Yisrael in western Jerusalem from 1925.



175 YEARS AND STILL GOING STRONG



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Imagine a time in the 19th century when Jews were the majority in Jerusalem, and when Arabic books freely recognized the historic Jewish connection to the Holy City. This was before Zionism and before the Arabs of the Holy Land rebranded themselves as Palestinians.

Looking back in history is particularly revealing when trying to explain the disputes of today. We are taught that Baron Edmond de Rothschild founded the Israeli wine industry in 1882, and are led to believe that Israel was a wine desert before that. The theory goes that under the Mamluks and Ottomans, wine was prohibited because of their Muslim religion. In fact, even though there may not have been a wine industry as such, Jews and Christians (including Palestinian Christians) always made wine. However, their winemaking was invariably domestic.

Contrary to what many believe, modern Israeli wine did not begin with Carmel Mizrahi. The oldest recorded winery in Israel's modern history was Ginio, founded in 1840 by David Ginio, who came to Israel from Salonika, Greece. It was situated at the beginning of Rehov Yehudim in the Old City of Jerusalem. Zion Winery was founded in 1848 by Rabbi Yitzhak (Galin) Shor on Haggai Street in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. This is our oldest existing winery.

The Galin family were Karlin Hassidic Jews from

Ukraine. They made *aliyah* in the 1830s and moved to the holy cities of Safed and Tiberias. The name was thought to be Galin, but an old stamp in the family's possession shows the name as Galina. The explanation is likely to have been the difference between the masculine and feminine of the same name. After the earthquake of 1837 they moved to Jerusalem, and the patriarch of the family, Rabbi Mordechai Avraham Galin, was appointed head of the Tiferet Israel Yeshiva. He was one of the VIPs to meet Sir Moses Montefiore on one of the latter's visits to Jerusalem and was inspired by his belief that Jews should return to agriculture, plant vines, and olive trees, and work for a living instead of living in poverty.

Rabbi Yitzhak, Mordechai's son, then a young man, decided to found a winery. Here they met with what appeared to be an insurmountable problem. They needed a license from the Turks, which was almost impossible to procure. However, by a stroke of luck, Rabbi Yitzhak's brother-in-law, Baruch Shor, did have a license to trade in alcohol. So they were able to use his license and also decided take his name. Therefore, from then on, they became known as the Shor family. The word *shor* in Hebrew means "a bull."

The winery cellar backed onto the Little Western Wall, and they placed the barrels strategically so no one would inadvertently touch them. They purchased grapes from Hebron, dealing with the same Arab grower for decades, and using those same indigenous varieties that people are talking about today (Hamdani,

Jandali, Dabouki, etc). The grapes would be brought to Jerusalem from Hebron in a convoy of donkeys. Most of the wines they made were sweet and were sold in small barrels. Bottles were rare and difficult to come by. If a family were lucky enough to have one, they would send the daughter of the house to refill it whenever needed. This was because the boys were studying, and the men were working. She would then return with a piece of cloth covering the bottle to preserve the *kashrut* from prying eyes and to avoid inflaming the Muslim street.

The Shors spoke Arabic and were thoroughly acclimatized to the cosmopolitan world of 19th-century Jerusalem. The Shor family in a way symbolized the modern Jewish resettlement of Jerusalem.

The most famous personality of the Shor family was the legendary Rosa, wife of Shmuel Shor, the third generation. She founded the first-ever wine bar shop in the old cotton market, which rises to the Temple Mount. It was called the Hamara of Rosa. She was, apparently, quite a character. She would serve arak and wine to the locals, and keep order with a 19th-century equivalent of a baseball bat that was always handy. When Shmuel passed away before his time, Rosa took over the management of the winery. After 77 years in the Old City, the winery was forced to move. The British decided to ban industry from the overcrowded residential area, and in 1925 the Shor family winery moved to Rappaport Street in Beit Israel in western Jerusalem. Rosa lived opposite the winery, which also



served as a home. Members of the family lived on the first floor; the ground level was the winery; and the third level was the cellar. Rosa was the first female general manager of a winery. The next would not be until the 2000s. It was an impressive milestone, especially in the haredi world.

By the founding of the State of Israel, the winery was managed by two brothers, Avraham Meir Shor and Moshe Shalom Shor. The winery was known as Shor Brothers. These days, many ultra-Orthodox do not serve in the army, but the Shor family did. Unfortunately, in the War of Independence they experienced three tragic losses which shook the family to the core.

As the family grew, the brothers decided to split the business in 1955. It was agreed that Avraham Meir would continue producing wine at what was by then known called Zion Winery. Moshe Shalom Shor undertook to leave the wine business and produce spirits. His business was named Shimshon Winery. It was a totally amicable arrangement, and they continued production in the same building, with a partition separating the two businesses. Youngsters of the time recall that sometimes the aromas of arak would waft into the winery area.

Zion Winery continued to make wine as it had since 1848. Shimshon Winery was passed down to Moshe Shalom's daughter Tzipora and her husband, Yona Mendelson. His sons, Yitzhak and Yechiel, decided to return to wine. After a few false starts and joint ventures, they eventually respectively founded Arza and Hacormim wineries. Though their branch of the family briefly left wine production, they were part of a family that had made wine since 1848, but their wineries were founded in the 1950s.

After 134 years in Jerusalem, Zion Winery moved to Haruvit Street in Mishor Adumim, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, in 1982. This is located at the beginning of the Judean Desert. At the time, it was regarded as one of the so-called "Jerusalem wineries," producing mainly liquid religion (grape juice and Kiddush wine) for the Orthodox community in Jerusalem. When the late Moshe Shor took over as CEO, he began a total refurbishment of the winery, investing in state-of-the-art equipment. As such, the winery made the same



move to quality that Carmel Mizrahi, Eliaz, Efrat, and Askalon (sic) did when they respectively changed their names to Carmel Winery, Binyamina, Teperberg, and Segal. Zion Winery today is unrecognizable from what it was, and extremely up-to-date and impressive. We first noticed the change when Zion Winery snapped up four gold medals at the Terravino competition held in Eilat in 2007. This was the first sighting of a winery on the rise.

Today, Zion Winery has grown to become the sixth-largest winery in Israel, but it remains a family winery through and through. The atmosphere and work practices are more in keeping with a small boutique winery. For all the years of its existence, the owner and the CEO have been from the family. This is pretty rare among medium or large family wineries. However in this case, the winemaker is also part of the family. That is unique. Zvika Shor took over as winemaker from his father in 1982. He is one of Israel's longest-serving winemakers. While renewing the winery, they also decided to upgrade the vineyards. They employed the services of Pinny Sarig, one of the most well-known and experienced viticulturists in Israel. They now have vineyards all over the country, including the Golan, the Galilee, the Coastal Plain, the Judean Hills, and the Negev.

The winemakers can therefore select the region most suitable for each particular variety. However, most of the best wines come from the Judean Hills and the Galilee.

In the 2020s, the winery went through a marketing makeover and launched a new assortment of wines. The fresh new look and bright labels gave the impression of a new winery, let alone one that has been around for so long. The experienced and dynamic David Gronich, ex Carmel & Yatir, became the marketing and export manager, and the winery had a successful relaunch. Zion Winery began winning



CAPITAL IS the premier label of Zion Winery.

THE FAMILY crest on the labels is taken from an old one found in the family archives.

ZVIKA SHOR is the winemaker of Zion Winery. He took over from his father in 1982.

MOSHE SHOR, z"l, was the legendary CEO, who built a state-of-the art winery.

awards in major local competitions, such as Eshkol Zahav and Best Value in Israel, and international competitions like Challenge International du Vin in Bordeaux. Israeli celebrity chef Yonatan Roshfeld even selected Zion wines as his pouring wine by the glass in one of his local operations.

Zion Winery is known for producing quality and good value wines at every price point. These begin with the entry-level Imperial label. Then there is the Estate label. The premier label is Capital, and the prestige wine is called Crown. The logo or crest on the leading brands is a copy of an old family label. Zion Winery still produces sweet wines, but the quality ones are made under the Moscato and Old City labels. The Moscato wines are low alcohol, frizzante, and lightly sweet, while Old City are rich, full-bodied red dessert wines, including a port style. My favorite Zion wines are the aromatic Imperial Sauvignon Blanc; the refreshing Estate Chardonnay; a spicy, flavorful Estate Shiraz; and the beautifully balanced Capital Merlot. Capital Lions Gate is an edgy, vibrant, Mediterranean-style blend.

We have recently celebrated some important anniversaries: 30 years of Domaine Castel and Tzora Vineyards; 40 years of the Golan Heights Winery; 70 years of Binyamina Winery; and 140 years of Carmel Winery. You may not have heard of Zion Winery, but they have been ever-present. They have made wine in three separate centuries, under the auspices of the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate, and the State of Israel. Generation after generation, the baton has been passed from grandfather to son and from son to grandson. Zion Winery is now reborn, 175 years young, and it seems to be going from strength to strength. ■

The writer is a winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com