

VINO WITH A VIEW

THE IMPRESSIVE Cremisan Monastery with terraced vineyards. (Photos: Courtesy)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Nemi Ashkar seems like a typical Israeli, even part of the *crème de la crème*. He is a hi-tech veteran who has worked for major companies like IBM, HP and Unilever in senior management roles. He loves wine and comes from a place where making wine was part of the routine of home life. A period in Silicon Valley introduced him to the culture of Californian wine and the quality of Napa Valley. He thought, "I can do that," and returned to found his own winery and started by building a winery in the cellar of his three-floor house.

Sounds familiar, but then the story becomes interesting and deeply personal. His family is from Ikrit, the Arab Christian village evacuated by the IDF in 1948 with the promise that residents would be allowed to return in two weeks. Since then, despite sympathy across the political spectrum for their cause, they are still campaigning with a deep longing for a return. Ironically, on death they are permitted to return, but only to be buried in the cemetery.

Ashkar was bought up with wine in the family home. His grandmother and mother made wine, usually from the local Baladi grapes. It was the woman's job. I tasted one of his mother's 20-year-old wines, bottled in an empty Grant's Whisky bottle. It was sweet, maderized – not dissimilar to sacramental wine – and it gave me an insight into domestic wine-making since the beginning of time in Judeo-Christian culture. It reminded me that not all wine is Cabernet Sauvignon from manicured vineyards for tasting and pontificating about. In some instances, making wine is necessary to make the most of the grapes you have in your hands. You either eat them, dry them to make raisins, or make wine.

In Lebanese villages, they use their grapes in a cycle. They eat as much as they can and make wine with the remainder. This they drink through the winter until it starts to turn. Come the spring, they distill the rest for arak. The next harvest, they start again. The reason is practical, simply to preserve and get the most out of the fruit and wine in turn before it deteriorates.

Ashkar lives in a beautiful house in Kafr Yasif, a largely Christian Israeli Arab town, with Muslim and Druse inhabitants, too. His balcony overlooks a breathtaking view of an olive grove carpet from the foot of his house to far away. This is the Western Galilee after all! He can see Haifa Bay on a clear day.

The winery is compact, tidy, scrupulously clean and very well-equipped. You have the feeling that here is someone well-organized and that the tidiness of the kitchen is important to him. You can't make great wine in a dirty kitchen... or winery. Ashkar was born in 1952, after the evacuation, but this does not assuage his feeling of belonging or urge to return.

He receives his grapes from the Upper Galilee and also a vineyard at Ikrit. There is evidence of old wine presses that show a wine-making past in the village. The wine labels reveal the hurt and dreams in equal measure. Designed by his talented artist daughter, the labels show a drawing of Ikrit with the church, houses and vineyards and the word Ikrit prominent and clear. Basically, the drawing is recreating a memory. In reality, only the church remains. The wine is a monument to the place, which is like a painful wound that never goes away, despite the fact that life goes on. In the meantime, they go to pray in the church to keep in touch with their roots.

Ashkar Winery has received some excellent recognition for its wines. They have been listed by some of

the leading wine restaurants in Israel, and even the iconic chef Yotam Ottolenghi has sought them out. I thought Ashkar's Sauvignon Blanc unique and full of character; his regular Cabernet Sauvignon had good structure and was full of flavor; the Shiraz had great varietal typicity; and the prestige blend Do'er was elegant and complex. Nemi Ashkar is a typical Israeli in some ways, but he is also a pioneer of the Western Galilee in wine terms, a shining example to his community and a leader in the public-relations battle to return to Ikrit.

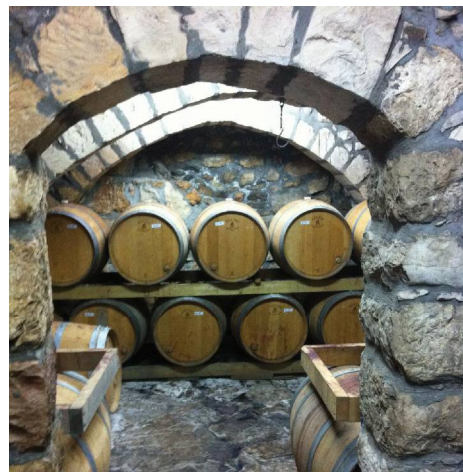
JASCALA WINERY is based at Jish, a.k.a. Gush Halav, in the Upper Galilee. This is a mainly Maronite Christian village. Jascala was a name given by the Romans. There is a beautiful old house owned by the Kharish family, where the winery was situated until it was beset by leaks. They now plan to move to the Dalton Industrial Zone, which is becoming a wine center of the Galilee. However, I hope they will keep this beautiful house with the deep well inside as a unique tasting room. From the vantage point outside the entrance, you have a fantastic view of Mount Meron rising before your eyes. Suddenly Nasser Kharish comes up, taps me on the shoulder, points out a green patch on the slopes of Meron and says this is their vineyard. The family are agriculturists. One always has to respect people who grow their own wine.

Here the family divides according to responsibilities. Nasser grows the grapes and his brother Richard makes the wine. Richard studied wine at Tel-Hai College. Their family also has roots in making rudimentary wine from Dabouki grapes that have been passed on from generation to generation, but they have left domestic wine-making behind. They are a salt-of-the-earth family and make some special wines, particularly their Merlot, which they prize more than the others. Both the regular one and reserve are good. There is also a special Cabernet Franc, which they produce in tiny quantities.

MONY WINERY is a paradox. It is situated at a monastery and is owned by an Israeli Arab family that makes kosher wine. It may be found next to the Deir Rafat Monastery in the Judean Foothills, near the Teperberg and Tzora wineries, not far from Beit Shemesh. Founded by the Artul family in honor of Mony – a son and doctor who died young – this is a more commercial winery, producing good value wine at comparatively low prices. Here Shakib is the patriarch. He is an olive-oil merchant from the Galilee who came to the Judean Hills in search of olive groves. His son Nur runs the winery and his grandson has studied wine-making in Bordeaux. The winemaker is Sasson Ben Aharon, a good winemaker with a ready smile and a laid-back, relaxed attitude. He has tons of experience and a good track record.

If you stand under the pergola at the winery, you have a fabulous view of the Sorek Valley, where Samson frolicked with Delilah. Here vineyards vie with olive groves in a patchwork over the gently rolling hills and shallow valleys that spread as far as the eye can see. If you drive through the vineyards you will find a drove of donkeys munching in a timeless way as donkeys here have done for centuries. High above the vineyards and winery you will see a statue of the Virgin Mary overlooking the fruit of the earth from the central vantage point of the monastery. At the winery, there is a cellar and tasting room in a real cave. They have good Shiraz and Chardonnay, and an excellent, inexpensive Colombar. If you don't taste their wine, at least sample their picante Souris olives and their excellent spicy olive oil.

THE LAST stop on our tour is in the central mountains at Beit Jala near Bethlehem. Planting a vineyard and making wine is a peaceful activity that is above politics. The professional discussion is between the terroir of the vineyard and the character of the wine



THE JASCALA tasting room is situated in an old family house overlooking the vineyard on Mount Meron.

in the bottle. You don't need a flag to grow grapes. Right-wing Israelis will call the region Judea and Samaria, left-wingers prefer the West Bank, and Arabs will call it Palestine. Not everything has to be political, so I use the term central mountains, which perfectly sums up the natural environment of this mountainous wine-growing region and does not insult anyone along the way.

There you will find the proud-looking Cremisan Monastery, founded in 1895 by Salesian monks. They soon planted vineyards and founded a winery. Like the Latrun Monastery founded in 1890 by Trappist monks, the purpose of growing grapes and making wine was to provide a livelihood. Latrun made wine with French expertise, and Cremisan with Italian. At Cremisan, the vineyards are terraced and abut on olive groves. Again, the view is dreamy and beautiful. The winery went through a transformation in the 2000s with new investment and wine-making assistance from Italy. Riccardo Cotarella, one of the most famous consultant wine-makers, became involved in the new Cremisan. Their Star of Bethlehem label specializes in indigenous Holy Land varieties like the red Baladi Asmar and white Dabouki. Their most famous wine is a white wine blend from Hamdani and Jandali grapes, which received international recognition and drew new attention to these old varieties that have been around for so long. They also have a memorable, long-matured brandy.

SOMETIMES IN Israel we are very insular and only see our own. Occasionally it is good to look in the corners and not always look in the mirror. Christian wine-making is alive and kicking. Coincidentally, I was struck in each winery by stunning views, the proximity of vineyards to olive groves and some pretty good wines. The vine and olive tree are symbols of both biblical Israel and modern Israel and two of the seven "blessed species" for which the land is known.

I am reminded of how the Church nurtured the wine industry in Europe in the Middle Ages. Some of the most famous regions were discovered and established by monasteries. Also, it is a salient point to consider how important the Catholic Church has been to wine. Is it an accident that some of the greatest food and wine cultures are the Catholic countries? How edifying it is to see that the Christian community is again making great wines in the Holy Land. ■

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