

KOSHER

WINE KING



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Menahem Israelievitch is the flying winemaker of the kosher world. A Michel Rolland (the world's most famous consultant winemaker) with a kippah if you like. He makes wine in three countries, mainly France but also Spain and Portugal, with a smile and a passionate desire to make the best kosher wine possible.

I have noticed he has a special quality: He is never satisfied with doing the minimum when he can do the maximum. Not a bad attribute for a winemaker. He runs his empire, producing roughly 500,000 bottles a year for Royal Wine Europe, from his car, and his cellphone is the dashboard through which he communicates, organizes, and makes wine at some of the most famous wineries there are. He has five regular workers and employs up to 40 during harvest.

Israelievitch is squat, good-looking, bearded and always smiling. There, I could have described Michel Rolland! He is the father of five and lives in Paris. His father, a classical musician of some note, was of Russian and Romanian origin, and his mother was from Morocco. He has 23 years of experience in wine and started doing the most menial jobs, learning from the bottom up. Eventually, he became his predecessor Pierre Miodownik's assistant. His wine knowledge and passion is allied with the administration precision of a *yekke* and an unforgiving work ethic – a great combination. Therefore, when Miodownik made aliyah, Israelievitch was the obvious candidate to succeed him.

I have always claimed Israeli wineries, and wineries that specialize in kosher wines, such as Herzog Wine Cellars in California, make the finest kosher wines because of the sacrifices and compromises one has to make when making a kosher batch in a nonkosher winery. Many kosher wines I have tasted over the years were not up to the standard of their nonkosher counterparts. I assumed this was because the kosher crew of workers had to be booked in advance, the parcels of kosher wines would therefore have to be identified in advance and harvested according to the religious workers' availability. The wines would then be isolated under lock and key and again receive treatment based on staff availability, rather than when the winemaker desired.

Israelievitch slaughtered a few holy cows for me. Firstly, he explained that the kosher crew is booked and on call. If a harvest is delayed to get more sun on the grapes, his staff also wait, to fit in with the vagaries of nature and the wishes of the particular winemaker, even if time and waiting cost money. Secondly, he provides staff to punch down the cap in the fermenting tanks or top up the barrels exactly according to the regime set by the winemaker. The objective is that the sitting winemaker makes the wine in his way, and the Jewish staff are there to exactly fulfill his wishes.

Israelievitch himself visits the wineries for the tastings. The formal making of the



THREE KOSHER wines of the highest quality: (from left) Drappier Carte d'Or, Château Malartic-Lagravière and Château Léoville-Poyferré.

blends is made with the winemaking staff and the winemaking consultant (including tasting with stars such as the aforementioned Rolland or Eric Boisse-not) and the kosher cuvée is part of the discussion. Otherwise he is traveling the country by train, plane or hired car and answering phone calls from the numerous wineries he works with, making their impossible requests possible.

He is very businesslike and well organized, but what I love about him is his passion for wine, immense knowledge and the excitement of a little child at tasting something good.

I asked wineries why on earth they would want to make kosher wines. They were all clear on one thing: "The kosher wine is sold with my label and we stand by the quality."

THE STORY of great kosher wines is not apologetically hidden away in some Jewish wine ghetto. Israelievitch makes wine at wineries celebrated around the world, loved by wine lovers and connoisseurs, and the making of a kosher wine is part of their project of excellence.

Take for instance, the Champagne Drappier house, founded in 1808 and now in its eighth generation. Located at Urville in the southern part of Champagne, the building goes back to the 12th century. I visited there and saw three generations of the family hosting visitors. It is not just a family-owned winery, but a family-run winery. Michel Drappier manages a business based on old-fashioned ideals and yet with a modern, pioneering regard and respect for the environment. They are traditional but innovative. His children play

a part. Charline helps marketing and hosting in the winery. Hugo is a trained winemaker, and Antoine loves being in the vineyards, particularly working with the horses. The patriarch of the family, André, visits every day, though he is in his nineties. His heartwarming smile lights up any day. Even the mother, Sylvie, is hard at work. When I was there, they hosted 20 VIP visitors to a four-course lunch. Everything was homemade and prepared by her. When I thanked her, she answered, "Oh, it was nothing. Just a picnic!"

Drappier Champagnes may be characterized by a focus on pinot noir grapes, which grow particularly well in their own vineyards, and minimal sulfur content. (Both Michel and André are sulfur sensitive.)

The Drappier Carte d'Or is made from Chardonnay and pinot noir. This is their standard cuvée representing quality and consistency. When it was launched in 1952, a sommelier said it had aromas of quince jelly; hence yellow was chosen as the color of the label. It has aromas of pear backed by a hint of brioche and is clean and refreshing with great acidity on the finish.

The Drappier Brut Nature is 100% from pinot noir. It has no dosage (the usual addition after disgorgement to round off the final wine). It has delicate berry fruit, a touch of toast with notes of pear and apple, and lime on the finish, great refreshing acidity, elegance and very small bubbles. The wine oozes class.

Both are kosher and *mevushal* (flash pasteurized) to appeal to caterers and reflect the quality standards of champagne. If you can sneak into non-kosher territory, I recommend their Grand Sèndrée, their prestige cuvée, made only in certain years. An out-

standing champagne.

Then there is Château Malartic-Lagravière, a Grand Cru Classé in the Pessac-Léognan growing area of the Graves region, south of Bordeaux, which dates from the 18th century. It is one of only six wineries to be classified for both red and white wines. In 1996 the winery was purchased by Alfred-Alexandre and Michele Bonnie, from Belgium. They installed very advanced winemaking facilities in 1997, which in those days were the talk of Bordeaux. They have been joined by other members of the family and began to follow sustainable viticulture. The octagonal space-age winery is still very striking. The grand château, beautiful gardens and manicured vineyards all reflect an impressive pursuit of excellence.

I was hosted by the elegant and charming Veronique (the daughter) and her passionate and deeply knowledgeable husband, Bruno. They have invested in quality, and the improvements can be seen in the wines. This is clearly a historic winery with its best days ahead of it!

They make some very fine wines. I tasted the 2016 (kosher) Château Malartic-Lagravière. It was rich, complex and satisfying, but with the soft tannins and good acidity that demand you take a second sip – the hallmark of a very good wine. It was made mainly from Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and a little Petit Verdot. It certainly was not apparent from any inferiority that I had to make allowances for it being kosher. The highlight for me was the Château Malartic-Lagravière Blanc, an outstanding example of a Graves white with the freshness and aromatic nature of mainly Sauvignon blending so perfectly with the fatness of the Sémillon. An exquisite wine, but produced in small quantities and sadly not kosher.

Finally, last but not least, the Château Léoville-Poyferré, a deuxième cru classé, or second growth. The origin of Leoville goes back to the 17th century. It is situated in the Saint Julien appellation of

the Haut Médoc in Bordeaux. In 1920 the Cuvelier family acquired the winery, and the current director-general is Didier Cuvelier.

The current management has taken the wine to a higher place than before. It has made kosher wine since 1999, so its commitment to this market is unwavering. It is arguably the finest winery producing kosher wine. Such is this winery's attention to detail that it harvests by row but leaves the end part until later, because it ripens more slowly. Therefore, the winery gathers the harvest team and sends them out again to finish the row. This obsessive pursuit of quality enabled the kosher wine to be made up of nearly the same components as the nonkosher wine.

Israelievitch, almost purring, told me that even if the winery were 100% kosher, they would not make better kosher wine than they do now. The Léoville-Poyferré 2015 was magnificent. Rich, ripe fruit aromas with a little spice, cedar wood and a long, lingering finish. It is a powerful wine, but its magic is that it also expresses elegance.

Each of these wineries has its own foibles and customs. Each makes wine in its own way with its own priorities. Israelievitch has to provide the kosher support services that allows each to make the wine it wants, which is of the required standard to justify bearing the winery label.

wines out there. The word "kosher" with regard to wine is not a dirty word. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Israelievitch clearly loves his work, and it is heartwarming to see the respect he receives from winemakers and winery owners alike. The future of quality kosher winemaking in France is clearly in good hands. ■

The writer has advanced Israeli wines for over 30 years, and is referred to as "the English voice of Israeli wine."
www.adammontefiore.com

THREE GENERATIONS of the Drappier family, owners of one of the finest Champagnes.
(Photos: Courtesy)



STATE-OF-THE-ART WINERY at Château Malartic-Lagravière in Bordeaux.

LEFT: SPOTLESS stainless-steel tank room at Château Léoville-Poyferré in St. Julien, Bordeaux.