

WINE-TINTED SPECTACLES



THE BALCONY of Galil Mountain Winery Visitors' Center in the Upper Galilee, overlooking Mount Meron.

(Photos: Wineries mentioned)

ASAF WINERY is home of Kedem Wine Village in the central Golan Heights.



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Sukkot is the wine harvest festival or maybe the wine tourism festival. Hol Hamoed is the perfect time to visit wineries and vineyards. It is the time to see Israel through wine-tinted spectacles. There are some distinct wine routes: the Golan Heights, Galilee, Coastal Plain, Judea, Central Mountains and the Negev.

The Golan Heights in the northeast of the country, bordering Syria, is a volcanic plateau that rises to 1,200 meters above sea level. It is overlooked by the snow-covered Mount Hermon and overlooks the beautiful Sea of Galilee. This was where the Israeli wine revolution began, with the pioneering Golan Heights Winery. Situated in Katzrin, in the central Golan, any visit should include a stop here. They give an excellent tour and explanation. Their Yarden and Gamla Cabernet Sauvignons are iconic cabs at different price points.

Other wineries to build up a day tour may include Pelter Winery, where there are local artisan cheeses and a craft distillery, as well as wine (kosher and non-kosher). It is situated at Ein Zivan. After, you may want to travel north to Mount Odem Winery, which is Israel's northernmost, highest-elevation winery. They have some interesting, quality wines.

A good place to stay is the Kedem Wine Village at Kidmat Zvi, where they have extremely high-quality cabins, a spa and a family café-restaurant with homemade food. They also own the Assaf Winery, where you can find wines from Chenin Blanc and Pinotage. The best way to see the Golan is by going on a jeep tour. This is the way to really get a feel of the territory.

The Galilee is the region that takes in the north of Israel, bordering Lebanon. The Upper Galilee is the Tuscany of Israel. It is our most beautiful wine region, with mountains, plunging valleys, stony ridges, running streams and thick forests. Here there are many vineyards, most not far from Mount Meron, Israel's highest mountain. The largest concentration of wineries is in the Eastern Upper Galilee.

Galil Mountain at Kibbutz Yiron is our most impressive winery, practicing sustainability in vineyard, winery, offices and community. Their Yiron is one of the best value prestige wines in Israel. Dalton Winery is to be found in the Dalton Industrial Estate. This was the pioneering winery of the Galilee. Look for the Asufa collection with colorful labels. The Recanati Winery will soon be opening a visitors center at their new winery. There is no lack of wineries on the Dalton Estate. Another one of interest is the Adir Winery, which combines a winery and dairy.

If you are more in the Western Upper

Galilee, there are fewer wineries but some good ones to visit. These include Stern Winery at Kibbutz Tuval (the Cabernet Franc is excellent) and the unique Kishor Winery at Kishorit. The last name is a village for adults with special needs, which includes the estate winery, a bakery and artisan goat's cheese. I like their refreshing GSM entry-level wine.

I combine the Lower Galilee with the Jezreel Valley. Together, they can make a reasonable wine route. A visit to Tabor Winery in Kfar Tabor, with an

explanation of their ecological vineyards, is a must. They have one of the best Sauvignon Blancs in the country. The Jezreel Valley Winery at Hannaton are specialists in Argaman, the main Israeli variety, and Carignan, Israel's adopted variety. This mini tour can begin or end at Tulip Winery, Kfar Tikva – the Village of Hope, in Kiryat Tivon. This is one of our brightest wineries, which also caters to adults with special needs. They have an excellent Sauvignon Blanc and Syrah, and innovative wines like White Tulip, White Franc and Franc Merlot. It's well worth a visit. The story will warm your heart.

The Coastal Plain is the most traditional region, being where Baron Edmond de Rothschild founded an Israeli wine industry at the end of the 19th century. It includes the winery towns of Binyamina and Zichron Ya'acov. This region is easily accessible from the center of the country. Furthermore, all the wineries are reasonably close together. The Zichron region, based in the valleys of the southern slopes of Mount Carmel, includes wineries founded in the 1880s, 1950s, 1980s, 2000s and 2010s.

CARMEL IS the historic winery of Israel, and their Zichron Ya'acov Wine Cellars is the oldest winery building, established in 1892, still in use. Here you will see the deep underground cellars built by Rothschild. Tishbi is a



winery owned by a family of growers. They have a restaurant, a bakery, and offer innovative chocolate and wine tastings. This is the destination for foodies.

Amphorae is one of Israel's most beautiful wineries, set in the natural forest area of Kerem Maharal. Here is the place to enjoy a picnic basket and a bottle of wine. Finally, Bat Shlomo Vineyards has a beautiful, high-quality, prestigious boutique hotel. Here one can combine food, wine and accommodation, along with hearing the Rothschild story. On the way north, it is worth stopping off at Kfar Vitkin to see Vitkin Winery. This is the family winery that was the pioneer of ABC winemaking (Anything But Cabernet/Chardonnay). Their Carignan, Petite Sirah and Grenache Blanc are outstanding.

The Southern Coastal Plain, southeast of Tel Aviv, is less about wine today. Real estate proved more profitable than growing vines. However, there are good wineries with individuality and character, like Neve Yarak, Ghito, Afek, Gros and Lewinsohn, which are easily accessible from Tel Aviv.

The region of Judea fills the gap between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. This comprises the gentle rolling hills of the Judean Foothills. These rise quite steeply after Beit Shemesh to the Judean Hills, which start at a 400-meter elevation. This was the first wine region to market itself and create a wine route. In the Judean Foothills, I recommend a visit to Hulda to visit Barkan Winery. It is Israel's largest winery alongside Israel's largest vineyards. From here, I like the Beta range from Barkan and the Whole Cluster wines from the Segal brand.

Domaine de Latroun is an interesting place to visit, at the Latroun Monastery. Their Syrah and Pinot Gris are their best wines, in my opinion. Bravdo at Karmei Yosef is a rare genuine estate winery with a great story. Then there is Clos de Gat, one of our leading small wineries at Harel. Their Syrah and Merlot are their wines I would look for.

The Judean Hills region offers no end of opportunities for the serious wine lover. Castel, Flam and Tzora are three

of Israel's finest, not so far from one another. Castel (Yad Shmona) is one of the most beautiful and advanced wineries in Israel, with a stunningly impressive barrel cellar. Their Castel Grand Vin and C Blanc du Castel are Israeli classics. Flam (Eshtaol) offers local cheeses and wine. It is the perfect place to enjoy an Eastern Mediterranean/Levantine experience on their patio overlooking the vines and forest.

The Flam Noble and Flam Classico offer quality and value at both ends of the price spectrum. Tzora Vineyards is a place for a tutored tasting, but if you can get on a tour of their Shoresh Vineyard, you will find it fascinating.

One of the most interesting wineries these days is Agur Winery, and Mony Winery offers a panoramic view over their Sorek Valley vineyards and olive groves under a vine pergola. Here the olive oil is a best buy and a must buy!

The Central Mountains (Judea and Samaria, or the West Bank) is biblical Israel: mountainous, sparse with stony, shallow soils. This wine route is, at the same time, the youngest and oldest in Israel. Its wineries were founded in the last 20 years or so, but this was the heart of Israelite winemaking over 2,000 years ago.

South of Jerusalem, I recommend Gush Etzion Winery, which has a restaurant; and in the far south of the Central Mountains, Drimia Winery at Susya. They are underrated, producing authentic and quality wines from an 800-meter elevation vineyard.

North of Jerusalem, I recommend Psagot Winery, certainly on the short list of Israel's most beautiful wineries. Shiloh Winery is a modern award-winning winery, in a place of immense historical significance to the Jewish people, where the ancient and modern may be seen together. Finally, at Tura Winery, you will always receive a warm welcome. My favorites from these are the Psagot Peak, a Med blend, Shiloh Cabernet Sauvignon and Tura Merlot.

THIS LEAVES the Negev, which is the largest wine region in area but the



YATIR WINERY is situated in the northeastern Negev at Tel Arad. (David Silverman)

smallest in terms of vineyards. This is the south of the country and, in fact, the desert makes up 50% of the country. The main wineries here are set far apart. Here the key is to select a winery and check the surrounding agritourism opportunities nearby. Yatir Winery and Midbar are in the northeastern Negev near Arad on the way to the Dead Sea. Ramat Negev Winery is at Kadesh Barnes in western Negev on the border with Egypt. Nana Vineyards are at Mitzpe Ramon, near the crater of the same name. Newest is the Pinto Winery in Yeroham in central Negev. Not far away is the Carmey Avdat Winery which offers wine, accommodation, ancient terraces and evidence of winemaking in ancient times.

For a guide, check out the Internet. Look at the books *The Wine Route of Israel* (2015) and *Wines of Israel* (2020) – both published by Cordinata – and *Wine Journey: An Israeli Adventure* (2021), which will help you plan your trip.

Note: Wherever you go, there are ethnic and Israeli restaurants of every type at every price point, showing the quality and vitality of the Israeli culinary scene.

In short, it is booming. Many foodies are visiting Israel only for its gastronomy.

Also in every region, there are craft breweries and distilleries, small home bakeries, boutique olive oil presses, artisan cheese dairies, chocolatiers hand-making chocolate, and beehives producing local honey. These can be sought out to pad a gourmet tour if one winery a day is enough.

Be sure to always book in advance to avoid disappointment. Also, it is wise not to fill every minute of the day with activities. There should be toilet breaks, time to eat, time to shop... Remember, everything takes longer than planned. I would suggest a maximum of three wineries a day is enough. Finally, it is recommended to spit out if you are doing wine tastings. Don't taste wine on an empty stomach, and be sure to drink a great deal of water.

Most importantly, have fun! ■

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

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ENTRANCE TO the Golan Heights Winery, a must-visit destination for all wine tourists. (Kfir Harbi)

AT CARMEL Winery in Zichron Ya'acov, it is recommended to visit the deep underground cellars.