



# NUNS IN THE HOLY LAND

Experts should perhaps be less condescending; sweet wines have a rich history and are more popular than many realize

THE RHINE VALLEY vineyards of Blue Nun in Germany. (Courtesy)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**B**lue Nun in Israel is a phenomenon. It is today the No. 1 imported brand to Israel and the best-selling imported white wine ever. It clearly taps into a need for easy-to-understand wines that deliver what the consumer is looking for.

When I came into the wine world in the late 1970s and early '80s, Blue Nun was at its peak and one of the best-selling wine brands in the world. There was also Mateus Rosé, with the bulbous-shaped bottle, and Mouton Cadet, the wine with noble roots. Both of those were imported to the UK by Hedges and Butler, a 300-year-old wine and spirits shipper owned by Bass Charrington Vintners. (I used to work for Bass Charrington.)

However, Blue Nun beat them both in volume sales and in history. It was first launched as a better-quality Liebfraumilch in the 1921 vintage. (Mouton Cadet was first produced in 1930 and Mateus in the 1940s.) The creator of Blue Nun was a German Jewish wine company called Sichel Söhne, based in Mainz, which had been founded by Hermann Sichel in 1857.

The Nuns on the label originally wore brown habits, but a printing error turned them blue and a new brand was born. Amusingly for the first shipment to America, the mixture of religion and alcohol was too potent

for the authorities and approvals were not given until girls replaced the nuns on the label!

The person that made it into the world's greatest brand was Peter Max Sichel. (I add the Max to avoid confusion, because another family member, Peter Allan, was a highly respected figure in the Bordeaux wine trade). Peter Max Sichel hailed from the German company and settled in Manhattan. I met him when I was export manager of the Golan Heights Winery and we wanted to get tips on how to advance the Yarden brand. He was dashing, debonair and kind, as befits his extraordinary life as a vintner, prisoner, soldier and spy – his biography *The Secrets of My Life* is a great read – but we did not get any secrets out of him. However it was a pleasure and honor to meet him.

He organized a series of advertisements, including the famous one saying Blue Nun was suitable “right through the meal.” Blue Nun succeeded at a time when semi-dry, medium or even semi-sweet wines became all the rage. Blue Nun was more recognizable than Liebfraumilch, and the clearer label was easier to understand than the typical German label with Gothic writing and long unpronounceable names. The brand soared.

However, by the 1990s a decline set in and in 1996 Blue Nun was sold to the seventh-generation family firm F.W. Langguth Erben. At one stage there were Sichel subsidiaries in the UK, US and France, but the only survivor of the family business is the French company, Maison Sichel, originally founded by the English

branch of the family. They probably rather frowned at the success of Blue Nun being focused on fine wines of Bordeaux, gaining great respect from their peers. Fun- nily enough, they maintain an interest in Israel as they market Clos de Gat, one of Israel's finest small wineries, exported around the world, and were involved from the beginning, even to the point of being in at the creation of the innovative name.

Langguth revived the famous brand by upgrading the quality, expanding the range, improving the presentation and choosing an iconic blue bottle. Incidentally, the largest-selling kosher wine in America (not including iconic kiddush wines like Manischewitz) is the Bartenura Moscato, which also comes in a blue bottle.

Today Blue Nun remains a success, exporting to 100 countries, even if not reaching the heights of its peak. However, in Israel the success has been just astonishing. The reason has been because it answers a need and because of the impressive work by one of the main wine importers in Israel – the dynamic Shaked family, which also owns the Derech Hayayin (Wine Route) chain of wine stores.

The legendary wine critic Daniel Rogov, one of my predecessors as wine writer for *The Jerusalem Post*, might have written about Blue Nun with his usual wit: “The kind of people who like this sort of wine will like it very much.” Damning with faint praise. It is a phrase I like very much and frequently use, always giving credit to Rogov of course.





### BLUE NUN AUTHENTIC

These are wines to drink, not taste. It almost misses the point to write a tasting note. This is the classic Blue Nun made from the Rivaner grape, a.k.a. Müller Thurgau, grown in the Rheinhessen region. Comparatively low alcohol, aromatic, fresh, fruity and semi-sweet. Served very cold, it is refreshing. NIS 40



### BLUE NUN GEWURZTRAMINER

The big hit in Israel, where Gewurz has replaced Emerald Riesling as the white wine of choice. I remember when Yarden launched the first Gewurztraminer, no one would buy it because they could not pronounce the word. How things change. The wine has the unmistakable Gewurz aroma of lychee, rose water, a spicy flavor and a semi-sweet finish. The wine combines three increasingly popular trends here: the Blue Nun brand, anything called Gewurztraminer and wines with perceptible sweetness. NIS 45



### BLUE NUN GEWURZTRAMINER RIESLING

This is new on the market and carries the Blue Nun story to the kosher market. It may be found in wine shops and restaurants. It has the traditional Blue Nun label. It is more aromatic than the Authentic, fruity and semi-sweet. A wine called blue wine is the cuvée of kosher Blue Nun found in supermarkets. NIS 50



### BLUE NUN RIESLING

The other table wines have synthetic corks; this has a screw cap. So sensible and easy. The wine has a more elegant, lively nose than the other wines. It is made from Riesling, the classic German variety, from the Rheinhessen region. It is slightly less sweet than the others but does not come in the blue flute bottle associated with Blue Nun these days. Best buy in the Blue Nun family. NIS 40



### BLUE NUN SPARKLING 22K GOLD

Don't be confused by the word dry on the back label (part of the confusing sparkling wine terminology). This is a semi-sweet sparkling wine with flakes of gold floating in the wine. Light, fruity and visually attractive. Serve it ice cold. It also offers mini 200 ml. bottles of this, making it a great beach or picnic wine. NIS 50 (750 ml.)

However we should be less superior and condescending. A wonderful book called *Why You Like the Wines You Like* has been written by Master of Wine Tim Hanni, followed up by *The Sweet Wine Lovers' Manifesto*. Copies of these should be sent to the marketing department of every winery.

The books explain that the wine world is run by "dry wine fashionistas" who ignore those members of the population who are unable to enjoy dry white wines or red wines because they find them acidic and astringent. They are what he categorizes as the "sweet wine vinotype." Their palate is too sensitive for regular wines. Yet the wine world tends to ignore this underclass and the wine intelligentsia will look down their nose at anyone who prefers sweet.

However, when you realize maybe 40% of the population in the West are sweet vinotypes (and even more in the Far East), you realize the wine industry is missing a trick here. The craze for White Zinfandel in the US and Moscato in Israel gives an clue we should not ignore. The Yellow Tail success was partly because of a touch of sweetness. As Hanni writes: "Mankind has been making wine for 8,000 years, and until the last 50 years, most of the wines were sweet wines."

Obviously we all know some of the most expensive



THE HISTORIC Blue Nun label from 1929. (Courtesy)

and rarest wines in the world are sweet – Sauternes, Eiswein, Trockenbeerenauslese, Tokay, etc. Yet among the Jewish wine intelligentsia, sweet wine is particularly reviled because of memories of kiddush wines like Manischewitz, Palwin and Konditon. Funny, because if I were to generalize, both Israelis and Jews worldwide have a sweet tooth!

So when I went into a wine shop to prepare for this ar-

ticle, I was not surprised when the manager said, "Yes Blue Nun is popular, but I refer to sell real wine," but the joke is on him and the people who only drink "real wine." We should learn from Blue Nun and open our eyes. There is a whole world out there. Some will graduate from semi-sweet wines to dry and be welcomed to the dry wine club. However, sweet wine vinotypes are unable to enjoy dry wines because of a genetically sensitive palate, not because they are inferior beings.

We used to talk about matching wine with food. Then we became slightly more relaxed, and recommended "matching wine to mood, not to food." Hanni recommends "matching wine to the diner, not the dinner."

It is a nice turn of events that this wine brand founded so many years ago by a traditional Jewish family in Germany should find itself again in Israel. I think Blue Nun teaches us all a lesson and empowers the sweet vinotype. Let's not denigrate them. Wine experts: get down from Mount Olympus. Sweet is not a dirty word. Drink what you like and enjoy it. ■

Known as the "English voice of Israeli wine," the writer has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years. [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)