

In the footsteps of the prophets

JUDEAN HILLS TEAM: [JITZCHOUNGROSSMAN \(WINEMAKER\)](#) • [SERENA SUTCLIFFE \(MW\)](#) • [EILIT BEN ZAKEN \(WINEMAKER\)](#) • [JONATHAN PICK \(WINEMAKER\)](#) • [ELI BEN ZAKEN \(WINEMAKER\)](#)



ELI BEN ZAKEN

The Judean Hills are flowing with wine, echoing the words of Amos the Prophet. Recently, four of Israel's finest wineries decided to pool their efforts to advance the Judean Hills as a relatively "new" quality wine region, in the same place where wine was made thousands of years ago.

In biblical times this region was a center of wine production. In those days, people drank far more wine than today because it was safe, whereas water was a carrier of disease. Vines were grown in terraced vineyards, brought to a nearby limestone wine press, for fermentation. The resulting wine was put into large amphorae (pointed clay vases with large handles) and then stored in cool caves. The wine was later exported and it was much prized by neighboring countries. Wine was one of the mainstays of the economy.

After the Muslim conquest, the wine industry simply dried up. Of course, individual Jewish families in places like the Old City of Jerusalem continued to make wine at home purely for religious ritual, using food grapes grown by Arabs in Bethlehem and Hebron. However, the once proud industry was laid waste.

The revival of Israeli wine had to wait until the late 1880s. Then Baron Edmond de Rothschild built wineries and planted vineyards. As far as the Judean Plain

was concerned, he planted vineyards in the flatter part of the Shfela area, southeast of where Tel Aviv is today. It was only in the 1950s and 1960s that there was a program to plant vineyards in the hills known as the Judean Foothills, something that was encouraged by the Jewish Agency. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were further plantings in the higher elevation of the Judean Hills. However, these were vineyards to supply the large wineries. The objective in those days was quantity. "Quality" wasn't in the equation yet.

In 1988, a restaurateur named Eli Ben Zaken planted a vineyard and produced a wine. He was a Francophile and called his wine Castel Grand Vin and he put "Haute Judée," French for Judean Hills, on the label. This was a tiny production of handcrafted wine, but it was the first attempt at quality in the region and the first time the appellation appeared on the label. In 1995, Serena Sutcliffe, MW, head of Sotheby's wine department, wrote that it was the finest Israeli wine she had ever tasted. With great passion, absolute perfectionism and great attention to detail, Domaine du Castel was born and brought quality to the Judean Hills.

At the same time, a veteran grape grower named Ronnie James, who grew grapes that were sold to the Carmel Cooperative, felt an urge to produce his own wine from his own grapes. In 1993, he founded Tzora Vineyards and became obsessed with creating a Judean Hills terroir. His charm, smile and "salt of the earth" character touched and motivated many people.

Almost by example, these two pioneers succeeded in changing the focus of a region. New vineyards were planted, a series of small wineries opened and the pursuit of quality became the order of the day. Now, the Judean Hills are thriving and considered one of the most dynamic wine regions in the country.

IT IS NOT surprising that Castel and Tzora are two of the region's four wineries. They have been joined by Flam Winery and Sphera, and have called their new consortium the Judean Hills Quartet. Their objective is to spread the message about the Judean Hills, rather in the same way that the Golan Heights Winery did with the Golan a few years ago. They are four of the best.

Domaine du Castel is quite simply the winery that has set the style and quality for Israeli winemakers. It has just moved into a magnificent new winery at Yad Shmona, near Neveh Ilan. Eli Ben Zaken has twice built the most beautiful winery in Israel. That is quite something. The new winery is a real cathedral (or should I say *beit mikdash*?) to quality.

Tzora Vineyards has continued to develop since Ronnie James died, before his time. One of his last decisions was to bring in a young, tousle-haired winemaker in 2006. His name was Eran Pick, and he has since become Israel's most famous winemaker, Israel's first ever Master of Wine. Pick is devoted to making wine from

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THE JUDEAN HILLS vineyard at Tzora – terra rossa on a bedrock of limestone. Inset: The Judean Hills Quartet brochure (and logo)

determined artist with a great deal of talent, drive... and, important in the wine business, patience. It is so appropriate and fitting that Tzora's viticulturist is Dor James, Ronnie's son.

Flam Winery is the creation of Israel's most prominent wine family. Two brothers, Golan and Gilad Flam, and their sister, Gefen, founded Flam Winery and they chose to establish their beautiful endeavor at Eshtaol in the Judean Hills. Their father, Israel, was the legendary chief winemaker of Carmel over the course of many years. Their mother, Kami, runs the finances of the company with an iron grip. It is a true family affair. Golan Flam is the winemaker, having studied in Italy. He is dry, poker-faced and silent – until you get into a vineyard, where he becomes positively talkative, as though his passion has burst out like a bubbling brook.

Sphera is a winery whose slogan is "White Wine Professionals," and it is devoted to making white wines only. The owner/winemaker, Doron Rav Hon, studied in Beaune, in Burgundy, and is a perfectionist, whose *raison d'être* is minimalism, precision and delicateness. Sphera is one of the main white-wine pioneers in the country.

Those who follow the most influential wine critics will not be able to ignore the high profile of these Judean Hills wineries. Castel was the first Israeli winery to gain four stars in Hugh Johnson's Wine Book, and has since been joined by Flam. In Robert Parker's

newsletter, *The Wine Advocate*, Castel has scored a best for Israel – 94 points – and is arguably the best performer year in and year out, with all its wines achieving high scores. Flam is one of the few Israeli wineries to have scored 93.

As far as the magazine *Wine Spectator* is concerned, the highest ever score for an Israeli wine was also by a Judean Hills winery, this time Tzora Vineyards. In addition, all of Tzora's wines have scored more than 90 points, and one of them featured in the Top 100 Wines of the Year. Finally, Stuart Pigott, one of the world's experts on Riesling, rated the Sphera Riesling as one of the top five in the world.

SO, WHAT is so special about the Judean Hills?

They rise from 300 to 900 meters in altitude, starting in the foothills and continuing to the Jerusalem mountains. The climate is Mediterranean, which means warm, dry summers and cool, wet winters. There is usually no rain in the growing season, and the vineyards do not suffer from the humidity of the coastal area. The region benefits from cooling winds from the Mediterranean Sea, and the cold air circulating from the Jerusalem mountains at night. The soils tend to be a shallow terra rossa on a deep bedrock of limestone; they are well-drained and very rich in minerals. The Judean Hills are covered with vineyards, but they tend to be small and varied. This encourages small -winery winemaking, and there are approximately 30 wineries

in the region.

Quite apart from this, the region is beautiful. Pine forests surround the vineyards, limestone rocks lie scattered among them, and garrigue, the Mediterranean brush, sprouts close to the ground in clumps. In the spring, wild Mediterranean herbs like za'atar and oregano mingle with the beautiful wild flowers. If you are lucky, you will see gazelles frolicking among the vines. (The viticulturists' place of work is a playground to others!) If you look around, you will come across fossils that underline the rich history this land has undergone over millennia.

The most surprising thing is the unusually cold spells that may be found in the valleys and corridors of the Judean Hills. When you visit, the winds and temperatures can surprise you.

In wine, the place where grapes are grown is important. That is why a Californian label with "Napa Valley" on it will create greater expectation (and cost) than "Central Valley." In Israel, the most famous wine regions for quality are arguably the Golan Heights, Upper Galilee and Judean Hills. This new initiative will help advance the Judean Hills further and introduce it to the general wine world outside the kosher confines. ■

Adam Montefiore has been promoting Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is known as "the ambassador of Israeli wine" and the "English voice of Israeli wine." www.adam-montefiore.com