



SPECIAL MEMORIES from four Yarden Cabernet Sauvignons: the 1985, 1996, 2004 and 2013. (Photos: Courtesy)



VICTOR SCHOENFELD, head winemaker of the Golan Heights Winery for the last 26 years.

WINE IS MEMORIES



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Earlier this year, the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 won a gold medal at the International Wine and Spirit Competition in London. It was a praiseworthy result not only because gold medals are exceedingly rare for Israel at the IWSC, but it also proved a reminder of an event 31 years ago that signaled the rise of Israeli wine for the first time. Then an unknown Israeli wine called Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1984, made by an equally unknown Golan Heights Winery, won not only the gold medal but also the Winiarski Trophy. This was the first major award for an Israeli wine and the first outward sign of a wine revolution in Israel.

In those days, the IWSC was the major wine-tasting competition, and for those onlookers who observed the results, it was an astonishing performance. The surprise and shock was similar to when China won a major trophy at the Decanter World Wine Awards (DWAA) a few years ago.

The Golan Heights Winery was founded in 1983 on the high elevation of the Golan Heights. With only its second vintage, it won these prestigious awards. This was first time Israel put its hand up and

said, “Hey, look at us!”

Here there was a stroke of luck. When its first three vineyards were planted in 1976, two of them, Yonatan and Ramat Naftali, turned out to be two of the best vineyards they had for Cabernet Sauvignon. This was not because of vineyard research, the view of an expert agronomist or winemaker intuition, it was more a heavy dose of good fortune. This meant that the fruit going into those early Yarden wines was already above par. This, allied to new world technology, expertise from California and a new desire to make the best wine possible, was enough to transform Israeli wine.

MY PERSONAL relationship with Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon covered each stage of my career. In the 1980s I was still in England and heard about the Golan Heights Winery from Peter Hallgarten, doyen of the English wine trade. He told me about the technology, raved about the spectacle of the night harvest, and I absorbed all the information like a sponge. I was the wine buyer and marketer of wine for a group of 60 hotels, and I was quick to support the Israeli winery where I could, though Israel was scarcely a household name in the wine stakes. This was my introduction to the quality wines of Israel.

The Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1985 was a revelation. It was the best Israeli wine I had ever tasted.

I was proud that Israel could produce a wine such as this. There is nothing like brown-bagging an Israeli wine at a blind tasting and then sitting back and watching the reaction.

What is true now was also true then. When I made aliyah in 1989 I had already worked for a few years with the wines and was in contact with the winery before I made the big move. At my memorable farewell dinner the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1985 was served sandwiched between Corton-Charlemagne Bonneau du Martray and Chateau Mouton Rothschild. I still have the beautifully designed menu.

In the Nineties I was already working for the Golan Heights Winery and enjoyed showing the wines at international exhibitions like Vinexpo in Bordeaux. The Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon always had a high profile.

A special event for me took place in 1999. The Golan Heights Winery was invited to the New York Wine Experience, which was the most prestigious wine event on the wine calendar. It featured the top 200 wineries in the world, and participation was by invitation only. The Golan Heights Winery was the first Israeli winery ever to be invited.

When I arrived and looked around, I saw many of the world's most legendary wines and wine personalities, and there was I, representing Israeli wine. The Golan Heights Winery stand was near that of Chateau

Margaux. It was like being present at a private party at which all the wine gods were invited. The wine that was my partner in explaining Israel to the world was the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1996. I was immensely proud and excited to be there, and the crème de la crème were able to taste this wine among the finest wines on earth.

Since then, Israel has regularly been invited to this wonderful event, but the first time is always extra special.

By the 2000s I was working for Carmel Winery, a competitor to the Golan Heights Winery. In those optimistic days Carmel went through a quality revival and came out with a series of single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignons. You may remember the Ben Zimra, Kayoumi, Ramat Arad and Zarit Cabs. The wines were pretty good, and it was an exciting new path for Carmel in those days.

When we wanted to test ourselves and judge what we had achieved, we had to consider a suitable competitor to blind-taste against, and I remember we chose the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 2004. We considered this to be the standard for Cabernet in Israel. It is somewhat indicative that the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon is as good as ever after 32 vintages, while not one of the Carmel wines are made any more. Later, the same Yarden Cab 2004 became the first Israeli wine ever to be selected in the *Wine Spectator* annual Top 100, another milestone for Israeli wine.

I always wrote about wine, and sometimes in great detail about the Golan Heights Winery; however, because I was seen as a competitor, I was ignored. When I left Carmel and became truly independent, I was welcomed back into the fold. I was now treated as a wine journalist. The first event I was invited to was one where the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 was being poured. Out of all the wines I tasted, it was the one that stood out, and it symbolized to me that Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon was still up there. The DWWA agreed and gave it the Platinum Trophy and 95 points! Talking about a closing of circles, this same wine was being poured a few weeks ago at the 2018 New York Wine Experience, 19 years after my breathless debut!

THESE DAYS the Golan Heights Winery makes many



THE GOLAN Heights Winery in Katzrin, producer of Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon. (Kfir Harbi)

more wines than it did 30 years ago. Now there are prestige and single-vineyard wines, which are made in tiny quantities and are priced higher. However, Victor Schoenfeld, the winemaker since 1992, still regards the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon as the true flagship of the winery.

Of course, he is right. To make tiny quantities of a rare, strictly allocated wine is relatively easy. To make larger volumes of wine while maintaining quality is far more difficult.

Not only is Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon regarded as arguably one of the finest Cabernet Sauvignons in the country, it also represents outstanding value, being priced very reasonably.

It is also a wine that can age, unlike the image of Is-

raeli wines, which, as a generalization, are given about a 10-12 year maximum. The Golan Heights Winery recently hosted 12 Masters of Wine at the winery in Katzrin. The guests were given the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1995 to taste blind. This is a 23-year-old wine! It was astonishingly youthful and showed incredibly well, belying the view that Israeli wines don't age. Recently, I needed a wine for a 20th anniversary and opened the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1998. It was browning, in decline, but it had a wonderful, delicate, sensual bouquet. It was an absolute delight. Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon has proven to be one of the wines with the best record for cellaring over the long term.

The Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon is made from blending fruit from the finest Cabernet vineyards in the central and northern Golan Heights. The winery's vineyards are divided into numerous blocs. Wines are grown, harvested, fermented and aged in individual lots, using a database of current and historical information that make the Golan vineyards arguably the most analyzed agricultural land in Israel. Only then are they blended to provide an authentic taste of the Golan Heights *terroir*.

The wine is usually aged 18 months in small French oak barrels, 40% of which are new. If they produce 300,000 bottles, it sounds like a lot, until you realize Chateau Mouton Rothschild produces the same. The wine usually has deep ripe fruit aroma, and a silky, concentrated character, a combination of New World power with Old World elegance.

I just heard that the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 has scored 91 points in the *Wine Spectator*. After 32 vintages the wine continues to be a symbol of quality, consistency and a wonderful ambassador for Israeli wine.

A great wine for me is not a dry tasting note but an emotional experience and a wonderful memory. I personally have shared many memorable experiences with this particular wine. If there is one wine that represents the story of Israel's quality wine revolution, this is it!

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



HIGH-ALTITUDE, cool with volcanic, basalt soil: The Golan vineyards.