

WINERY OWNER and winemaker David Nachmani, proud recipient of some prestigious awards. (Photos: Nachmani Winery)



NO ROOM FOR SMALL DREAMS



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

In 2021, in the midst of our second year of a pandemic, a fairly unknown Israeli winery decided to send a wine to the Decanter World Wine Awards, organized by the well-respected *Decanter* magazine. This just happens to be the largest wine-tasting competition in the world and arguably the most prestigious. They sent the wine just for the hell of it, with the feeling “well, let’s see what they think of us.”

The result was a shock and surprise, even to seasoned Israeli wine watchers. To prove that fairy tales come true, the wine was awarded 97 points, the highest score ever achieved by an Israeli wine in this competition,

and a Platinum Medal. To put this in perspective, in the last six years only two other Israeli wines received Platinum Medals. These were Yarden Heights Wine 2012 and Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 2013, both produced by the Golan Heights Winery. Points are less the issue in these competitions, but the previous highest scores for an Israeli wine in the competition was 96 points, achieved by Teperberg, Carmel and Psagot.

All these wineries are well-known brands, yet the fairy tale winery was barely known even by followers of the Israeli wine scene. The winery was Nachmani Winery, situated in Gan Ner, on Mount Gilboa, in the Jezreel Valley. The wine was the Shira Reserve 2017, a blend of Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Their fruit comes from the Golan Heights and Upper Galilee.



VISIT NACHMANI Winery and enjoy the view, eat some cheeses and taste their award-winning wines.

The Nachmani wine did not go all the way. That has happened just once for an Israeli winery, and by coincidence, I was intimately involved. In 2010, the Carmel Shiraz 2006 from Kayoumi Vineyard won the Regional Trophy in the Decanter World Wine Awards. I, along with the winemaker, Lior Lacser, was invited to the gala and presentation dinner held at a grand venue in London. The winners were announced, with the grandeur, drama and anticipation of the Oscars. Imagine our amazement to hear our wine’s name called! This Shiraz, made in the year of the Second Lebanon War, when Upper Galilee vineyards were closed pre-harvest because of the barrage of rockets, won the international trophy! Dressed in a bow tie, I proudly collected the trophy with the winemaker. To date it remains probably the leading award ever for an Israeli wine. It was described at the time as the sensation of the competition.

However, this does not make the success by Nachmani Winery any less romantic. Their result certainly piqued my curiosity. I decided to meet them, and they came as they make wine, as a family. We met at a coffee shop. I was immediately taken with their charm and passion. They are in love with wine, like we all are.

I listened to their story. Their wine odyssey began in 2000 when a friend dumped 200 kilos of Merlot grapes on David Nachmani’s doorstep, literally. The grower said he had nothing to do with the grapes and was about to throw them away, but he thought that David, with his creativity and curiosity, would have fun with them. And fun was what they had. The family used hands, feet, garbage bins and unbridled enthusiasm to make that wine. For winemaking advice, he found a dusty book coincidentally written by his father-in-law, Heinz Kurth, on home winemaking. He managed to procure the bottles he needed from Tzora Vineyards. The task set by his vineyard owner friend had been fulfilled, but unknowingly, this spontaneous action implanted a bug in the Nachmanis, which propelled them to delve deeper into the wine world.

A thoughtful birthday present for his 50th birthday sent David and Frances to the wine appreciation course organized by Haim Gan’s Ish Ha’Anavim (The Grape Man). Gan is one of the pioneers of Israeli wine. He has been responsible for many milestone events in our wine development including the first wine auction, the annual White Wine Festival and the first



BARREL ROOM at the small, domestic winery.

THE NACHMANI Shira scored 97 points in the Decanter World Wine Awards.

THE NEWEST release is a rose, inspired by daughter Shaked.

international wine and spirits competition. However, he is mainly influential through his regular tastings and wine appreciation courses, with which he brought thousands of Israelis closer to wine.

After completing the course, Gan sensed the wine aspirations of the couple were not sated and advised them to take Soreq Winery's practical winemaking course, so that they could learn at the sharp end, how to make the stuff. What Gan has done for wine appreciation, Soreq's Nir Shaham has done for winemakers. Countless future winemakers fanned their passion by attending these courses and became future winemakers. Haim Gan and Nir Shaham have been unsung heroes of wine education for more than two decades. Not bad gurus for the new winemaking couple. Then David supplemented what he had learned by gaining international experience. He went to Stellenbosch, South Africa, and spent time at Fairview Winery (of Goats do Roam fame). This winery is owned by Charles Back, who is from a famous, Jewish winemaking family.

NACHMANI WINERY was founded by David and Frances Nachmani in 2003. David is the winemaker and Frances is involved in the running of the winery. Shaked, the youngest child, works in sales and marketing, and Hagar, the elder daughter, designed the labels. Each of the regular wines is named after the members of the family (children, daughter-in-law and grandchildren.) The labels are all different colors, personally chosen by the relevant person, and on each label there is the silhouette drawing of the Nachmani residence.

How seriously should one take these scores? Well, as a consumer, I am pretty cynical about scores and awards. When I purchase wine, I do not take much notice of the medal sticker on the bottle, but I know many consumers do. Particularly in America, wine lovers will say to each other "this is a 92-point wine" as though that explains everything. However I spent 27 years working for Israeli wineries. With this different role, my view was the opposite. Whenever we won an award, I would be as pleased as punch, and talk it up as much as anyone. Yet, if we did poorly, I would ask "who takes competitions seriously?" No doubt there is a great deal of chance and luck in these competitions. You soon learn to treat triumph and disaster just the same. The best advice was given to me by the legendary CEO of Carmel, the late Israel Ivzan. He used to say never become too excited when you win an important award, or too disappointed when you don't.

Now I write about wine, the pendulum has swung back again. I do not give scores. I personally do not think it is intellectually honest to give a score to wine that is constantly changing in the glass. What



THE NEW face of the winery is Shaked Nachmani, responsible for marketing and PR.

you taste at the beginning of the meal may be totally different to what you come back to an hour later. Also I don't feel the need to give a score to paintings, a concert or a meal, so I don't believe wine as an art form is any different.

I could still sniff out the fairy tale nature of the story following the *Decanter* results, which I felt justified acknowledgment. Nothing ranks with *Decanter* in terms of the quality of judges or the prestige of the competition. Whether cynical about competitions or not, it is a third-party recognition at the very highest level. That counts for something, and certainly for far more than the international competition where once we won a medal without entering a wine!

In fact, Nachmani Winery has been quietly appearing on the awards roster since 2010, when winning Best Domestic Wine in Terravino, the competition founded and organized by Haim Gan. Then they started to win medals in international competitions such as the AWC (Austrian Wine Challenge) and the IWSC (International Wine and Spirit Competition). Still, nothing was of the scale to prepare one for the *Decanter* result.

Sending wines to competitions is not easy. Forms

have to be filled in, the wines have to be imported, pass through customs and be delivered in a timely fashion to the correct address. Fortunately, the English-born Frances was more than up to the task. When the results were intimated, Frances had an inkling that an exciting surprise was on the cards, reinforced by recognizing a barcode in a communication that was sent out. She could not sleep for a week, before her premonition was proved correct.

The result was explosive, the interest was immediate and Nachmani Winery was catapulted to the attention of Israeli wine folk. The person whose life was really changed was Shaked, who overnight became the charming, eloquent spokesperson of the winery. However, apart from great public relations, the winery seems to be operating as before, apart from the refreshing new rosé they have produced. Shaked wanted a wine she could drink with her friends. It is fresh and vibrant and named Johanna, a name her mother and a grandmother share.

All visitors to the winery report a great wine experience. It is open on weekends. The view is beautiful and tranquil, the cheeses are delicious and the hospitality is warm and personal: a family's welcome from one wine lover to another. As always, it is best to book in advance.

A few weeks ago, I met David Nachmani by chance at Eli Ben-Zaken's Razi'el Winery. I snapped a photo of me standing between Nachmani and Ben-Zaken. I described myself as a thorn between two roses. This reminded me of the Cinderella story of Ben-Zaken's Domaine du Castel, which is well documented. In 1995 the head of Sotheby's Wine Department, Serena Sutcliffe, Master of Wine, tasted Ben-Zaken's first wine: The Castel Grand Vin 1992. She wrote that it was the best Israeli wine she had ever tasted and her letter included superlative after superlative. Following this seminal event, Ben-Zaken, who refers to her as the winery's fairy godmother, said he felt a train had arrived in a station and he had to decide whether to get on that train. Well, he did and the rest is history. Castel became arguably Israel's finest winery.

The *Decanter* fairy tale of Nachmani Winery reminds me of the Castel story. The question is whether the Nachmanis feel their *Decanter* performance represents any sort of crossroads. Will they continue to make winery for fun, basically as a hobby, or will they catch their train, and continue onward and upward. Time will tell. As the late president Shimon Peres said: "No room for small dreams."

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