



Royal family in California

WINERY CEO Joseph Herzog (left) raises a glass with winemaker Joe Hurliman. (Photos: Courtesy)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The highest-profile kosher winery in California is the Herzog Winery, situated at Oxnard, which is owned by the Herzog family. They have been making wine for eight generations and are the owners of Royal Wine Corp. and Kedem Winery.

Baron Herzog wines were first launched in 1985. The name “Baron” came from the honor bestowed on Philip Herzog in 1876, when the Emperor Franz Joseph started to use the Herzog wines produced in Slovakia. The family made wine for six generations there, survived the Nazis and fled the Communists before arriving in New York in 1948. There Eugene Herzog took over Royal Wine, founded Kedem and the company became the most important in the kosher wine scene. Were the wines any good? Not yet, but the family was about to lead the change to quality dry wines and change kosher wine forever. As part of this change, they decided to launch a quality Californian winery.

In 1985, Baron Herzog Wine Cellars was founded. It was wholly owned by the Herzog family. The winery for its first 20 years used custom crush facilities. They made five wines in that first year: Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, White Zinfandel, Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc. David Herzog, CEO of Royal Wine,

made a very important decision early on. He employed the services of Peter Stern, who turned out to be an iconic figure in the history of both Israeli and kosher wine.

Peter Stern was a Californian winemaker who had worked for both Gallo and Mondavi. In 1983, he became the wine consultant to the new Golan Heights Winery, shepherding and tutoring a succession of young, inexperienced winemakers. He maintained this job for 20 years before becoming the consultant to Carmel for five years. He, more than anyone else, brought in New World technology to Israel and the Israel quality wine revolution owes him a great deal of credit.

As the winemaker for Baron Herzog, he also set new standards of kosher Californian wines. When the winery developed the new range of regional Special Reserve wines, they dropped the “Baron” and the winery became known as Herzog Wine Cellars. In the late 1990s, Herzog wines scored 94 points in the Wine Spectator and Wine Enthusiast. These were then the highest scores for kosher wines anywhere and remained a marking post.

Sales grew. The entry-level Baron Herzogs were great value for money and the Herzog Special Reserves brought attention to the quality of the winery. I once visited the facility where the wine was made in Santa Maria with Peter Stern and then was struck by the pursuit of quality.

THE NEXT major date was 2005, when the winery acquired a permanent home in Oxnard in Southern California. A state-of-the-art winery was built with all the most modern equipment and technology. The winery was named Herzog Wine Cellars. It was really two wineries in one, because it included the possibilities of making both volume wines and small-plot, handcrafted wines. By now, the on-site winemaker was Joe Hurliman, (Peter Stern lived further away.) Hurliman began his career in the mid-1980s working with Alban Vineyards and Sine Qua Non Winery. He started to work with Peter Stern at Herzog in 1998 and eventually took over. In 2006, Joseph Herzog took over as manager of the winery on behalf of the family.

The next landmark decision was to purchase vineyards. The Herzogs had always been against this, believing they were winemakers, not growers. However, in order to safeguard existing fruit and avoid rocketing prices, the winery had to bite the bullet and in 2010 they also became farmers.

Herzog Winery today produces roughly three million bottles. They produce wines ranging from \$6 a bottle to over \$200. The wine labels range from the entry-level Baron Herzog, to Lineage, Variations, Special Reserve, Single Vineyard, up to the prestige Special Edition. The flagship is the rare Generation VIII, only produced in especially good vintages. The Herzog Winery also produces wines for the Weinstock brand,



HERZOG WINERY'S four main labels: (from left) Jeunesse, Lineage, Baron Herzog and Herzog.



HERZOG WINE Cellars in Oxnard, California.

which are young and fruit forward. Then there is the genius Jeunesse label. These are semi-sweet wines, in bottles that look like quality table wines made from varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon. Masterful and very successful. The wine intelligentsia will frown and shake their heads, but there is clearly a market for those who prefer something sweet. I am waiting for the Israeli winery with the smarts to do this and with the marketing talent to carry it off like Herzog.

The winery has invested in purchasing and developing vineyards in Clarksburg, Lake County, Napa Valley and Sonoma. Apart from these, the winery has a number of long-term agreements with growers that crisscross the California appellation. The winery has a fleet of its own wine tanker trucks and uses its own tank farm at the Lange Twins facility in Lodi, usually for beginning the winemaking process for white wines closer to the vineyards. This type of midway station is no different to what a Napa Valley winery will be doing in reverse, if they are bringing fruit from, say, the Central Valley.

I met with Joe Hurliman. He is wiry, intense and focused – slightly bent, like an about-to-be-released spring. He has an earring in each ear and is likely to be wearing a Herzog Cellars cap and a leather jacket. He is an absolute wine geek and fitness fanatic. He just has to work out every day, wherever he is, whatever the circumstances. He is totally absorbed in making the best wine he can at every price point, and loves the idea of having different vineyard areas to give wine lovers the opportunity to taste different terroirs. His wine epiphany came on a visit to Robert Mondavi Winery in 1985. He changed direction, began making wine at home and buying any grape variety he had not tasted and has never really stopped since then. He used to get wound up prior to the High Holy Days about what it would do to his precious wine, until Philip Herzog, David's brother told him "Don't worry, it will play out the way God wants," which released him from taking it all on himself. He is both talented and experienced. For him it is personal. He regards the wines as his children.

JOSEPH HERZOG is a big, young man, the youngest of the eighth-generation of Herzogs. He is the son of Ernest, who was CEO before David Herzog and he signed the bottle of that first wine in 1985. He is a New Yorker, but like his brother Morris who traveled to England to manage the family business there, he traveled to

California. His other brother is winemaker of Kedem Winery and he spent a short time there, making wine and designing the tasting room. His epiphany wine was the Contour 1998, a blend of Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay. He is engaging and full of passion. It is amazing how he has adopted the winery and how the winery has adopted him. I met him in his office with the large volcanic rock on the table from one of the new Lake County vineyards. He showed me his boots in the car, which are permanently ready for frequent visits to the vineyards. We overstepped our time in the winery tank room, as he almost skipped from tank to tank, eagerly showing samples of wines in process. This is someone with pride and passion and significant knowledge. This gave me great pleasure because I always think of the Herzogs as commercial animals and they obviously chose the right person for the job. Wine has taught him patience and he has learned there are no short cuts. If you meet him, just ask him what he thinks of Pinot Noir, and you will understand the passion. The winery is clearly in good hands.

Today there is a winemaking team of three. Joe Hurliman is Head Winemaker and he has two assistants, Barry Henderson and Alicia Wilbur. The visitors' center was full when I was there. Most of the visitors were not Jewish, but locals or people traveling on the Ventura County wine route. The jewel in the crown is the Tierra Sur Restaurant, one of the finest kosher restaurants in America. The paradox was that when I was there, the restaurant was full. There was not a *kippa* (yarmulke) in site. The diners were locals who also consider it the finest restaurant within a 50-mile radius. They all know it is kosher... but that does not bother them because the food is so good.

I particularly liked the fact they offered some really expensive fine wines by the glass with the use of a Coravin (a sophisticated wine bottle opener/preserver).

When I was there, I tasted some special wines. One was a sublime Eagles landing Pinot Noir 2007. This is a label exclusive for their customer club. The Herzog to Kalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 was tight, focused, with layers of complexity and its best days still to come. However, the wine that stole the show was the Herzog Special Reserve, Alexander Valley 1997. It was elegant, flavorful yet beautifully defined. A 22-year-old wine showing beautifully. Only after I tasted it, was I told it was *mevushal* (flash pasteurized). That made me think, because the prevailing view is that *mevushal*

wines are lower quality and last less well. As for the regular wines, I am a great fan of the Baron Herzog Zinfandel and Chenin Blanc, the Lineage Cabernet Sauvignon and the Special Reserve Albarino.

Herzog Wine Cellars is a genuinely impressive winery producing quality wines at every price point. It is a symbol of the kosher wine world and the jewel in the crown of the Royal Wine-Kedem empire. There are other quality kosher wineries in California, but none

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THE FAMED Warnecke vineyard in Alexander Valley, Sonoma.