

# THE SPECIAL ENVOY



JAY BUCHSBAUM, Royal Wine Corp. executive vice president of marketing and director of wine education. (Tzvi Simcha Cohen, Royal Wine Corp.)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**R**oyal Wine Corp. is the largest importer and distributor of kosher wine in the world. It is also the largest marketer of Israeli wine outside Israel. The person who was most wine knowledgeable there for as long as I can remember is Jay Buchsbaum, the executive vice president of marketing & director of wine education. Apart from his personal story, he is the person who played a major role in the recruiting and gathering together of Israeli wineries.

I have known Buchsbaum for nearly 30 years. He has a bouncy, cheerful, optimistic countenance, and a flop of distinguished gray hair overlooking the thickest and most expressive dark eyebrows.

His mother was a third-generation American and his father was born in Germany. He qualified as an accountant auditor and hated his work. He did not like wine unless it was very sweet. He jokes that the sweet Cream White Concord was far too dry for him. The extra sweet Malaga was more to his taste. In 1976, as a 23 year old, he was by chance offered to be a salesman for a company called Wine Imports of America. He wanted a change but was put off when they said he would have to travel. However, when they said, "Don't worry about that, we will pay," he was overjoyed and slipped in almost by accident to a new career. He found himself selling the iconic Kiddush wine Schapiro, "so thick you can cut it with a knife," and Giacobazzi Lambrusco. This was the beginning of Lambrusco mania in the United States. Funnily enough, Giacobazzi

is now selling its kosher Lambruscos in Israel.

Buchsbaum found out he was a good salesman, and what was more, he enjoyed it. He also started to get an appreciation for wine. However, his wine epiphany came when he was invited to work for the San Francisco Wine Exchange. This was for him nirvana. The company was made up of 10 boutique wineries with tiny production, and these wineries opened a window in his mind. He was curious, fascinated to gather information and could never gather enough. It was an introduction into the world of fine wine. Of course, the wines were not kosher, but the new wine-loving Jay was able to stay strictly loyal to his religion while becoming embedded in a new world by keeping a low profile. He explained how at meals he would order a salad, until one day a big shot guest ordered a kosher meal. Only then did Jay feel free to do the same.

Now a wine lover, Buchsbaum used to approach David Herzog of Royal Wine before the festivals for the latest and best kosher cuvées and he became a customer. It was not long before Herzog thought, "Why am I selling him wine? He can come to work for us." So, in the late '80s, Buchsbaum began to work for Royal Wine at a time when the quality of kosher wine began to take off. Hagafen, Herzog, Gan Eden and Weinstock were making dry kosher wines in California, and the Golan Heights Winery and Tishbi had been founded in Israel. The Rothschild family in France had made their first kosher wine.

NOTHING WOULD be the same again. It was the perfect time to join. Royal Wine started making kosher wine throughout the world and representing Israeli wineries in order to satisfy

the growing hunger and interest of the kosher wine drinker back home.

During this time, Jay Buchsbaum became the most visual educator about kosher wines in America by appearing on a regular slot in the Nahum Segal Radio program, and later in videos, podcasts, etc. Cometh the hour, cometh the man. He took to this like a duck to water. I have been in this business a long time. I have rarely come across someone so natural, fluent, passionate and enthusiastic in front of a microphone or camera. I once found myself in a traffic jam in bustling Manhattan with Jay. We were stuck in the car and were hot and bothered. Suddenly the call came through for his weekly live slot. As though there was a press of a button, Jay was immediately switched on, on-message and smoothly professional. The transformation was as quick as lights coming back on after a power cut.

Once or twice I have had the embarrassment of sitting beside him at a joint appearance, when I was invited as a guest. I say embarrassment, because alongside Jay one feels inadequate, almost like a deaf mute, as he flows with ease from answer to answer, whilst I struggled to appear articulate. He certainly has a gift and hundreds and thousands of people learnt about the kosher wine revolution through his broadcasts.

However, his greatest contribution to Israeli wine is in the creation of the IWPA, the Israeli Wine Producers Association. With the active support of Royal Wine, the Herzogs and in particular Nathan Herzog, Royal decided to invest in the Israel wine sector. Now, when I made aliyah, there were just two wineries exporting to America. These were Carmel and the Golan Heights Winery. Today there are more than 70 Israeli wineries selling wine in America. Israel simply became the fastest growing sector in kosher wine. Royal foresaw the new trend, led the charge and rode the tiger.

If Nathan Herzog was the foreign minister of Royal Wine (in fact he is the president!), then Jay Buchsbaum was the special envoy to Israel. He started to comb the country for the best kosher wineries and even made contact with non-kosher wineries “just in case.” Once a winery even thought about becoming kosher, that would be it. The special envoy would be onto it. He would knock on the door at a winery and be told, “Why are you here? We are only thinking of going kosher the vintage after next.” However, with dogged determination they built a portfolio. Today they represent 29 Israeli wineries and market them together.

The most documented story is of Domaine du Castel. This is the winery Jay calls the Château Margaux of Israel. In 2002, they were a non-kosher winery but made a batch of kosher wine for a client. The super-sleuth special envoy was on to it and decided to go and visit, with no confidence that the owner would even agree to see him. He met Eli Ben Zaken, encouraged him to go fully kosher, made the up-front commitment (with no authority from his management) to buy the inventory in advance. This bold gesture was fully supported by the Herzogs.

THE REST is history. Castel went kosher and began to be represented by Royal. For all the doubters, the wine arguably won even more international recognition after the change than before. Ben Zaken himself will never forget Jay’s intervention and support, because it carried them through a rocky period.

Today the Israel Wine Producers Association offers an extraordinary range of Israeli wine. Some of the largest and best wineries in Israel are part of the group. Barkan-Segal, Carmel, Teperberg, Tabor, Binyamina and Zion are there, which means they represent six of the top 10 wineries in Israel. Castel, Flam, Yatir are also there. These are some of our finest boutique wineries. Then there is Vitkin, Tulip, Matar by Pelter, Psagot, Shilo, 1848 and Jezreel Valley wineries, which are not far behind. It is very representative of Israel, though when you look at their map, they are clearly lacking a winery from the Golan

Heights and the Negev. There are a few strange choices on the list, presumably achieved by personal contact rather than quality, but overall it is an excellent portfolio.

I was the first to form a consortium of Israeli wines to advance Brand Israel. Handcrafted Wines of Israel was established in 2003, but it did not last. From then until now there was nothing. Nada. Attempts to get wineries to work together were thwarted by the wineries themselves. Ego ruled, and wineries failed to understand that the most important brand in Israeli wine is Israel itself! During the following 15 years, the only body that succeeded to gather together a large group of Israeli wines was Royal Wine, and for that they deserve nothing but credit. Now they are also contributing to the newly launched Wines of Israel campaign organized by the Israel Export Institute. Exciting times!

As for the special envoy, he sees Israeli wine at a tipping point. He said, “Nike was an overnight success, but people should not forget it was 25 years in the making.” He encourages those wineries which are making wines in a more Israeli style, like Vitkin, Netofa and Jezreel Valley. As for his favorite wines, he singles out the Herzog Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 and both the Castel Grand Vin 2004 and 2014. Then he swiftly says we should give more credit to whites, mentioning the Herzog Russian River Chardonnay and C Blanc du Castel. He also gives a special mention to Tulip Winery, who employ adults with special needs. “Now that,” he says with pride, “is a winery with a Jewish soul.”

In the long history of Israeli wine, there will be a special place devoted to the part played by Royal Wine, the Herzogs and Jay in the advance of Israeli wine in the United States of America. I, for one, remember Jay Buchsbaum’s contribution with affection and gratitude. ■

*The writer has worked to advance Israeli wine for over 30 years and is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. adammontefiore.com*



EXAMINING AN ancient wine press in Yatir Forest. (Photos: Courtesy)



A SELECTION of the Israeli wines in Royal Wine’s portfolio.