

MAKING THE desert bloom: A green vineyard in the arid expanse. (Nana Winery)



DESERT WINE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Throughout Israel, the main pest damaging vineyards and eating grapes is the wild boar. They know when the grapes are ripe as well as any winemaker. When they come out at night and gorge on the grapes, you know the harvest is imminent. That is, except for one region, the Negev desert, where it is marauding camels that can cause a major problem. A camel will eat a vine down to the ground as though it was a salad. This begs the question, how many vineyards around the world are associated with camels? Here, in a nutshell, or maybe a hump, you can understand the uniqueness of the Negev Wine Region.

The Negev makes up well over 50% of the landmass of Israel, but it is the smallest wine region by far. Only 5% of the nation's wine grape vineyards are grown there, and there are only 20 or so wineries spread out throughout the area. Yet there is immense interest worldwide in Israel's desert wines. The vineyards symbolize the prowess of Israeli agriculture in making the desert bloom. The wineries represent both advanced technology and Israeli creativity.

The individuals involved, whether growers or winemakers, illustrate the curiosity and stubbornness of Israelis, prepared to tilt at windmills to follow the more difficult path. The 'Research & Development' that Israel is doing in agriculture in general and in the Negev in particular is way ahead of many other wine-producing countries.

As far as wine quality is concerned, the Negev is nowhere near our best quality wine region, but the wine world does not abound in desert wines, and there is growing interest in vines grown in extreme conditions. Furthermore, now that the threat of global warming has finally hit home, there is a fascination about what is going on in the Negev, and the lessons

that can be learned. As far as Israel is concerned, maybe it is the Negev that is the most intriguing wine region of all.

One of the problems is the distances between wineries. In the past, each winery operated in isolation, in its own bubble, with its own activities, and there has been little to bring them together. Until now. A new Negev Wine Club has been formed by the Merage Foundation and Hashomer Hachadash.

The Merage Foundation, headed by the impressive and articulate Nicole Hod Stroh, supports social and economic initiatives in the Negev. Hashomer HaChadash is an educational organization that acts to strengthen agriculture in the land of Israel.

There are 15 wineries that have signed up and more have applied to join. The objectives are to connect the dots – to join the activities of the wineries and to connect them to the potential local agri-tourism nearby each individual winery. In that way they will advance tourism, the local economy, and help to establish the Negev as a high-quality and unique wine-growing region.

Many don't know that the Negev desert in ancient times was a wine center of some repute. A pottery shard recently found at the military garrison of Tel Arad (next to the modern-day Yatir Winery) conveyed the important message: "If there is wine, send quantity." This was dated 2,600 years ago! Wine was needed for refreshment. It was in demand for the thirsty, as it was safer to drink than the water, which carried diseases. However, it was the Nabateans who tamed the desert.

The Nabateans were Arab nomads who really opened the wine trade in the Negev during Roman times. They were free to roam unchallenged, and wine was simply good business. Their settlements were strategically positioned along the Spice Route. Travelers, smugglers and traders were good customers.

The wine trade became still more commercial with

the Byzantines, who capitalized on the Nabateans' initiative by creating large commercial wine presses. Remains of an advanced wine trade may still be seen at Avdat and Shifta, where they had vast winemaking capacity. Archaeologists have recently discovered that it was climate change and a plague that brought the successful wine industry to its knees. Ironic that today we are talking about climate change and a pandemic.

In our times, the first winery to show an interest in desert viticulture was Carmel. In 1988 grapes were planted at the Ramat Arad vineyard in the northeastern Negev. The first desert wine was a Merlot launched by Carmel in 1992. They were part owners of Yatir Winery, which was founded in 2000, and the wines were launched in 2004. These were years I worked with Carmel & Yatir, so I am personally familiar with the story.

Yatir is a desert winery, situated alongside the Ramat Arad vineyard and overlooked by Tel Arad. Initially they produced wines from the Ramat Arad vineyard, but eventually Yatir Winery came to focus solely on vineyards in Yatir Forest. Recently though, they have returned to the Negev with their recently launched new label 'Darom by Yatir.'

The forest was planted starting in 1964. It is now Israel's largest planted forest, and a unique micro-climate for growing quality wines. No doubt Yatir Winery is the standout winery in the south of Israel.

Yatir Forest is on the outskirts of the Negev, showing the beginnings of a desert climate. The winery has a beautiful new visitors' center. Certainly a visit to Arad, Tel Arad, Yatir Winery and Yatir Forest makes a great day out, not only for the wine lover, but indeed for anyone looking to tour and hike in pastures new.

In the late 1990s, the first vineyard was planted in Mitzpe Ramon and in typical innovative Israeli fashion, brackish water was used from deep wells to irrigate the vines, along with treated sewage from the local army base. The first grapes were a symbol of



ALON & Yogev Zadok of Ramat Negev Winery plant vines in the Kadesh Barnea area. (Ramat Negev Winery)



A HUMPED friend in the Ramat Arad vineyard, next to Yatir Winery in the northeastern Negev. (Yatir Winery)

what could be achieved. Most of the fruit was swallowed up by Barkan Winery. A Tishbi wine from a Sde Boker vineyard gained international recognition in the early 2000s. Zvi Remek was an American ex-pat who opened the tiny Sde Boker Winery. We all loved his enthusiasm about ‘wine from the Negev.’

These days there are three desert wineries flying the flag: Ramat Negev, Midbar and Nana. The Zadok family planted their first vineyard in 1996 in Kadesh Barnea and founded a winery in 2000. Their Ramat Negev Winery is today the largest winery pushing Negev wines. It is truly a family winery. Alon, son of the founder, studied in Florence and is now the winemaker.

Midbar is the Hebrew for desert. The winery is owned by the Wolf family and is based in Arad. The name ‘Nana’ in Nana Winery is taken from the nickname of the Eran Raz, one of the pioneering growers in Mitzpe Ramon. He has a great story and he tells it well. Dana Beny is the winemaker. She is young, promising and in the ‘one to watch’ category.

In my view the best wines of all three wineries are white. The Midbar Viognier, Nana Chenin Blanc and Ramat Negev Neve Midbar White are standout favorites of mine. Reds are not the same quality as the whites – though Midbar Pinot Noir won a local gold medal – the Syrah-based blend from Nana can be characterful and their Tethys blend is good. The Ramat Negev Ramon Petit Verdot is a nice wine.

The newest initiative is the Pinto Winery from Yeruham, who have just launched their first wines. Each winery has a great deal to offer, but their public relations is not the best and lags far behind the rest of the country. It is hoped that membership in the Negev Club will encourage and inspire greater professionalism and raise the communal bar.

These are the main commercial wineries, but there are of course many other small, even tiny wineries, making wine with character and individuality.

Certainly, when you see vineyards in the brown-beige, stony, sandy surround of the Negev, it is actually as moving as it is surprising. Such is the contrast between death and life. Arrive at Nahal Zin in Mitzpe Ramon and you are today confronted with a narrow green river of beautifully manicured vineyards. Eran Raz, by his example, has guided other families to also plant in the same strip.

Likewise, when you visit Nitzana and see Ramat Negev’s sandy vineyard right next to the Egyptian border, it conjures up images of romantic pioneering and dreamers.

Most exciting is the flight to Eilat. When you look out of the window and see a plot of green vineyard standing defiantly apart from the barren desert, it gives you the chills.

The soil of the Negev is mainly loess. The elevation of Mitzpe Ramon where the best desert vineyards are situated is 800 meters above sea level. Temperatures vary between baking hot days and very cold nights. There is no humidity and little other vegetation, so there is a lack of diseases and pests that attack vines. There are constant winds that funnel through the vine rows, which aerate the vines. The Negev wineries produce something like 450,000 bottles.

We have mentioned Yatir Forest, Ramat Arad, Mitzpe Ramon and Nitsana, but there are also wineries from Eilat, the Arava up to the northern Negev. Let me give the last word to Hod Stroh: “We are confident about

the immense potential of developing this region as a leading wine tourism destination, we believe in its great business potential. Therefore we are convinced that the unique desert wine experience of the Negev can attract thousands of local and international visitors, becoming a major growth engine for the region.”

It is exciting to see Negev wine tourism receive such an important boost. We will be watching the developments closely. Even *Time* magazine selected the Negev desert for its list of “World’s Greatest Places to Visit,” in 2021. Maybe the time of the Negev has come.

Sukkot is the wine harvest festival. If you are tired of going to Galilee, get in a car and go to the desert instead. You can have a tour and tasting at a winery, see a desert vineyard, visit a local farm and an ethnic restaurant, stay overnight, and get to know the hidden treasures of the Negev. ■

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



THE WINERIES get together to fete the founding of the new Negev Wine Club. (Negev Wine Club)