

Stepping stones to success

The past 30 years have seen Israel's wine industry receiving higher and higher grades from the experts and publications that count

ELI BEN ZAKEN, owner of Domaine du Castel. (Courtesy)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Israeli wine has undergone a number of key events that have propelled it forward in terms of image and recognition.

The first was in 1900, at the Grand Paris Exhibition, when Carmel received gold medals alongside some of the finest French châteaux. These were the first major awards for an Israeli wine. (The wine that was most successful was called Carmel No. 1; at the time, wines were often numbered to make them more easily identifiable.)

This award highlighted the rebirth of an Israeli wine industry after 2,000 years, and brought the wines of the Rishon Lezion and Zichron Ya'acov Cellars to the world's attention. The wineries were founded by Baron Edmond de Rothschild, who provided French viticulturists and even a winemaker from Bordeaux. Thus, the Israeli wine industry was founded on the roots of French expertise.

In 1976, Carmel's wine maker, Freddie Stiller, took some spare barrels used for the maturation of brandy for aging his precious wine. Carmel's Special Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 1976 was the first Israeli wine aged in small oak barrels in the new international way. Though it did not create international waves, it did

highlight to Israelis that wine could be something of value representing quality. It was modern Israel's first quality wine.

The next seminal event was in 1987, when Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1984 won not only the Gold Medal, but also the Winiarski Trophy in the International Wine and Spirits Competition. This was a surprising – if not astonishing – result and confirmed that Israel was capable of making world-class wines.

The Golan Heights Winery, using the services of a California consultant and UC Davis-trained wine makers, brought the “new world” wine revolution to Israel, forever changing practices in the vineyard and winery for the better.

This was followed by Yarden wines winning the Grand Prix d'Honneur Trophy three years in a row at Vinexpo, then the world's largest and most important wine exhibition. Israeli wine was now on the map.

Dr. Yair Margalit was the first in a new wave of quality boutique winery owners who showed there was another way. His Margalit Winery was founded in 1989, and this example spawned a whole series of small wineries created over the next 15 years. Margalit Special Reserve was Israel's first “cult wine.”

In 1995, Serena Sutcliffe tasted the new Castel Grand Vin 1992 and wrote that she considered it the finest Israeli wine she had ever tasted. She was a Master of Wine and head of Sotheby's wine department. Do-

maine du Castel was one of the new, small boutique wineries that sprang up in the 1990s. It was the beginning of the small-winery boom in Israel, and Castel represented a new attention to detail to make a quality product at any cost.

In the late 1990s, Castel became the first Israeli winery to have a product named Wine of the Month in the British magazine *Decanter*. It succeeded in doing this three times, with the Castel Grand Vin and C Blanc du Castel, a varietal Chardonnay.

In 1999, the Golan Heights Winery became Israel's first to be invited to the New York Wine Experience. This was a gathering of the finest 200 wineries in the world, with attendance by invitation only. It was and remains arguably the most prestigious tasting event of the calendar year, and is regarded as such by the participating wineries and the few who are able to purchase tickets. It was a fine moment for Israeli wines to take their place among the finest wines in the world.

In 2005, the first *Rogov's Guide to Israeli Wines* was published. This was an annual guide written by the late wine critic Daniel Rogov, at one time the food and wine critic for *The Jerusalem Post*. His guide was sold on the shelves of quality bookshops the world over and played a big part in marketing the new self-confidence of Israeli wines.

Yet Israel still had not received recognition from the world's most famous wine critic, Robert Parker. He had



TWO WINES that raised Israel's reputation around the world: Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon, Castel Grand Vin. (Courtesy)

ERAN PICK, Israel's first Master of Wine. (Courtesy)



been sent wines but seemed to avoid tasting them. He was such an influential figure in the wine business that a score of 90 points could ensure that a wine was sold out in a week.

Finally, in December 2007, his *The Wine Advocate* organized the first-ever tasting of Israeli wines. The wines were sampled by Mark Squires, from the great man's tasting team. The result was that Yatir Forest 2003 scored 93 points.

This marked the making of the Yatir Winery, situated in the unfashionable wine region of the Negev. It was at the time the highest score ever given by Parker for a kosher wine, an Israeli wine and, indeed, any wine from the Eastern Mediterranean. When Parker published his *Seventh Wine Buyer's Guide*, Israel was given nine pages – the same as New Zealand and more than South Africa.

In 2008 Domaine du Castel was awarded the maximum four stars in Hugh Johnson's *Pocket Wine Book*. This is a pocket encyclopedia published annually that was and remains the largest selling of all wine books.

In Britain, Johnson is regarded with the same reverence that Parker is in America. The difference is that Parker is a critic who gives scores to wines, whereas Johnson is a prolific writer, telling the story and painting the colors of wine. In his pocket guide, he scores wineries rather than individual wines. When Castel received four stars, it was the first time any Israeli winery was given this rating.

In 2010, Carmel's Kayoumi Shiraz 2006 won the Decanter International Trophy, described by the organizers as a sensational result. Israeli wines were by now regularly winning gold medals and trophies. The Golan Heights Winery, Barkan and Recanati were particularly prolific, but this was arguably the finest award given to any Israeli winery.

Wine Spectator and *Wine Enthusiast* are the main wine magazines in America. Between the years 2012 and now, Israeli wines were listed for the first time ever in the prestigious end-of-year lists for best wines or best value wines of the outgoing year. It seems not so unachievable today, but it failed to happen for so long that this was an important breakthrough in attitudes toward Israeli wines.

In 2016, Eran Pick, wine maker for Tzora Vineyards, became Israel's first Master of Wine. This instantly

catapulted him to become the most instantly recognizable Israeli in the wine firmament. When you consider that there are only 300 or so Masters of Wine in the world, it becomes immediately obvious what an incredible achievement this was.

Wine Spectator has published two features on Israel in the 25 years I have been here. They were very nice to read, but the gap between the articles was rather too long for my liking. However, in 2016, it published its third feature about Israeli wines – this time making it the cover feature.

Israel featuring on the cover was the finest endorsement yet for Israel as a quality wine producing country. Furthermore, the cover headline was "The Wines of Israel: Surprising Quality from an Emerging Region." This created enormous interest in professional wine circles and further advanced Brand Israel in the heady world of fine wine.

THE SCORES given to Israeli wines have steadily increased over the years. The highest scores ever given by the wine magazines that count are as follows: *Wine Spectator* awarded 93 points to Tzora's Misty Hills 2013; *Wine Enthusiast* awarded 94 points to Recanati's Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve 2011; and *Wine Advocate* awarded 94 points to Alexander Amarolo 2011, Clos de Gat Muscat Syra 2006 and Castel Grand Vin 2013.

So there we are. Five thousand years of wine making. One hundred and twenty five years since the founding of a modern wine industry. Thirty years since the beginnings of a quality revolution.

In the past 10 years, we have really begun to receive third-party recognition of the highest quality. We are on a journey. Look what we have achieved in the last 20 years and let's see where we are in another 20 years' time. ■

The writer has been promoting Israeli wines for over 30 years and is known as the "English voice of Israeli wine."
www.adammontefiore.com