

SEEKING BALANCE, NATURALLY



YOSSI YODFAT, a master in revitalizing old vineyards, in Um Tut, Shefaya, near Zichron Ya'acov. (Photos: David Silverman, DPS Images)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Yonatan Koren is a person of vision. He had a dream to make organic wine and did so at Lotem Winery. When he became enchanted with Portugal as a wine country, he took it upon himself to talk, schmooze and persuade the relevant authorities to set up a Twinning Wineries concept. This is being implemented.

As a winemaker, he became an integral part of the most prominent organic winery in Israel. (There are only two that I know of.) There are a few organically grown vineyards in Israel. For instance, the Golan Heights Winery's Odem Vineyard Chardonnay has been organically grown for many years. However, making organic wine means following the organic rules not only in the vineyard but also at the winery.

Going organic has up to now had mixed results for wine. Whereas the organically grown potato or carrot will be sought after by certain customers who will be prepared to pay more for it, organic wine has always been slightly frowned upon as one step too far. It has never really taken off.

The marketplace, though, is changing fast. Once it was simple. You would go into a wine shop and buy wine listed under helpful headings like red, white, maybe Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, or even Burgundy, California. Now you can buy organically grown, organically made, low sulfur, no sulfur, biodynamic, natural, vegan wines... not forgetting kosher of course! There is a whole new underworld of compassionate winemaking coming to the fore. The wine world has suddenly become a lot more complicated!

In Israel we are way behind, but things are also changing here. Sustainability is becoming a trend. The Golan Heights Winery was given certification for introducing "Sustainable Agriculture" by the Californian-based Lodi Rules. Tabor Winery is converting its vineyards to becoming "Ecological Vineyards," as certified by The Society of the Preservation of Nature in Israel. Tzora Vineyards has been certified to the standards of Fair'n Green.

Funnily enough, I have always thought that sustainability as a concept and vision was a good partner for kosher from a marketing point of view. Kashrut would appear less voodoo to the regular, non-kosher wine drinker if explained alongside sustainability.

No doubt, Koren is the pioneer of organic wine in Israel. He has since left Lotem, but I was eager to meet him to learn what drove him as a winemaker. With a full head of black hair, black-rimmed glasses and bushy beard, he looks more like a yeshiva *bocher* than a winemaker, but winemaker he is.

Koren has always been fascinated by alcohol. At the tender age of 14, to satisfy his own curiosity, he was making his own infusion liqueurs, which he sold at school. Later, he made beer. The first wine to turn his head was the Carmel Selected Emerald Riesling. He was not alone. It was then the biggest wine brand in Israel. He spent his youth and his money sitting at the counter of the Vino Cigar wine shop in the Azrieli shopping center. There he tasted, purchased and talked about wine. Wine became embedded as a passion, a scratch that would not be satisfied unless he made wine.

KOREN STUDIED wine at the Ohalo College in Katzrin, and learned from established winemakers like Tal Pelter and Ari Erle. His studies took him to Burgundy, an experience that influenced him greatly. He is crazy curious, part mad professor, part



YONATAN KOREN,
a pioneer of organic
winemaking in Israel.

intellectual tinkerer and part unshakably wedded to his vision, come what may.

“Why not?” protested Koren almost with disdain, when I asked if it was possible to make good organic wine. He grew his wine in the Tzivon vineyard, which lies within an oak forest at an altitude of up to 750 meters, near Mount Meron. Ido Sirkin, his partner as wine grower and viticulturist, is well on the way to having the first biodynamic vineyard in Israel.

Sirkin and I had met before. He was a winemaker at Carmel for a very short time. However, the big commercial winery did not suit the individuality of this idealist and man of the soil. Instead, he decided to devote his winemaking skills to growing wine. He has an extraordinary empathy with his vines, and is on a mission to give them the best chance to grow up into interesting wines.

Koren told me, “When I first saw Ido in the vineyard, I immediately saw someone in tune with nature and at one with his vines. He seemed to move so easily or even flow in the vineyard.” It seemed as though there was a duet going on between like-minded artists here, one in the vineyard, the other in the winery. They had a joint attitude “interfere less and receive more.”

The other thing they talked about was “our shared objective to grow acidity. We have sugar, ripeness and color in abundance. It is acidity we need.” They both sought balance, an ecological balance in the vineyard and a natural balance in the wines.

The most representative wine of the Koren concept at Lotem Winery is the Nebbiolo. It is a cussed grape that does not travel well. In Barolo wines from Piedmont, it achieves true greatness. In the Galilee, it is unique and therefore of great interest, and it shows the principles with which the wine was made. The Nebbiolo 2016 was complex, with an attractive red cherry, berry fruit nose. A pleasant surprise, even if not outstanding.

Abaya Winery lies at the foot of the Yehiam Fortress in the Western Galilee, 10 minutes east of Nahariya. There I found Yossi Yodfat, a winegrower/winemaker who believes in a sense of place, local produce, being at one with the environment, and making wine as naturally as possible. He is a “terroir”iste, but not just any grower, as he runs a rehabilitation home for sad, run-down, lifeless vineyards.

The norms of regular wine growing and the use of fertilizers and herbicides can destroy the natural balance in the soil. Vineyards that are no longer of any use are grubbed up and something else is planted instead. Yodfat fell in love with an old vineyard that was about to be thrown on the scrapheap, known as the Shuni vineyard, in Hanadiv Valley.

IT WAS A 40-year-old, bush-vine vineyard, which probably had been abused to gain high yields for production of grape juice and kiddush wines for years. To this vine psychiatrist, this was the ultimate tragedy. He took it on as a project. Over time, with patience and plenty of tender loving care, he started dry farming and growing organically. Slowly, the vineyard began its revival. His wines are fermented with wild yeast. The wines undergo no filtering or filtration, and only the minimum amount of sulfur dioxide is added. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. This previously tired vineyard is now producing wines of quality, individuality and character.

Abaya’s wines focus on Carignan and Colombard. In the 1980s and ‘90s, they were the heaviest planted red and white grape varieties in Israel, but they would rarely appear on a label. Carignan would be used to make cheap blends and for both kiddush wine and grape juice. Colombard would be used for grape juice, in blends and occasionally for distillation to make brandy.

The names did not add value and were hidden under labels that were considered more attractive to the consumer. When there was not much Cabernet about, a Carignan wine would sometimes be labeled Cabernet Sauvignon, and Colombard would occasionally be a hidden component in Emerald Riesling.

Now, it has been realized, these two varieties grow particularly well in our hot climate, and Abaya is a specialist in both. The winery produces a single vineyard Carignan from both the Shuni and Um Tut vineyard, and a playful blend of the two together. From Colombard, there is a dry white wine and an orange wine, (a white wine made like a red wine), from the Sindiani Vineyard in Hanadiv Valley. My favorite was the Um Tut Carignan 2016, focused and quite tannic, with a distinct aroma of violets.

Yodfat is the perfect example of the mantra, “a wine is a product of a person and a place.” He leans back slightly when he talks, with his head tilted to one side,



ABAYA WINERY
vintages, made in the
vineyard by Yodfat.

as if weighed down by the mass of hair tied with a band that sits on top of his head like a crest. The passion and belief come through in his eyes. He explained the same philosophy as Koren and Sirkin: “I try and do less with the wine each year,” but goes on, “I want people to buy the wine not because it is natural, but because it is good.” He believes the future of Israeli wine has to be with varieties like this.

Yodfat, Koren and Sirkin are people with extraordinary passion who grow and make wine with an exclamation mark. They inspire curiosity and spark an interest among wine lovers looking for a truly personal expression. They each believe in individuality, minimum intervention, authenticity and balance in nature, along with care of the environment.

A well-known international wine buyer was recently quoted as saying he did not make a purchase because of the wine or winery, but because of the people. It was finding the caliber of person he wanted to work with that led him to the wines. If you are looking for people who grow wine with passion, and produce wine with soul, then let me introduce you to these three musketeers. These are the kind of people this wine buyer is looking for. ■

The writer has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years and he is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com



LOTEM WINE is grown
organically in the vineyard
and made organically at the
winery.