

IT WILL BE ALL WHITE ON THE NIGHT



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The focus on wine in Israel has always been skewed to red wines. Over the past 135 years, it is the red grapes such as Alicante, Carignan and Cabernet Sauvignon that have always been the most heavily planted varieties.

There was a long time when red wines were better quality than the whites, and the Jewish tradition always has had a built-in bias, or preference, for red over white.

Then there is the infuriating wine snob who pontificates with pride: "I only drink red wines," as though that sets him apart as a wine maven who really understands.

However, it is white wines that are more suitable for our hot, humid climate. They go better with our food, and are a more exacting test of the winemaker's art than red wines. In Israel, the history of white wines, apart from sweet Muscats, really began in the 1960s, when a semi-dry (more like semi-sweet) wine called Carmel Hock was at its height. This was the first time a white wine led the Israeli wine industry. Now many remember it in association with spritzers, the great idea of adding soda water to a simple wine to make a refreshing long drink.

Then the concept of rosé came to the fore in the form of a wine called Grenache Rosé. It was also semi-dry on the label, but sweeter to taste. Rosé was then a middle man's wine. A wine for someone who could not decide, because rosé went with everything. It had a taste like a white wine, and looked like a light red wine. It became a bestseller in the 1970s.

When the first varietals (wines named after the dominant grape variety) were produced by Carmel in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a dry Sauvignon Blanc, a semi dry Sémillon, and a Grenache Rosé, along with a red Cabernet Sauvignon. In the 1970s an *oleh hadash* (new immigrant) arrived that was to take Israeli wine by storm. It was Emerald Riesling, a cross between Riesling and Muscadelle, coincidentally created in 1948, the date of the founding of Israel, in California. It did not succeed anywhere, but in Israel it became a sensation, and was the largest selling wine in the 1980s and 1990s.

When I made aliyah in 1989, 75% of the wine sales were white wines. This was overturned after 1992 by the French paradox, the *60 Minutes* program in the United States about healthy properties of red wine, and the new ability of winemakers to make simple red wines with the fruit and refreshing acidity of white wines without the astringency associated with reds. Thus, the percentage was soon overturned and Israel became a red wine haven again.

The turnaround in quality of white wines started in 1983. When the Golan Heights Winery produced the first Yarden Sauvignon Blanc, it was referred to in America as "Israel's first world-class wine." Before Yarden, Israeli whites used to oxidize quickly, yellowing after a few months on the shelves. The first Chardonnays arrived soon afterward in the late 1980s (Yarden and Carmel Rothschild in those days.) However, as Israeli reds began to win awards on the world stage, Israeli whites still lagged behind.

I suppose it was at the turn of the millennium, in the early 2000s, that Israel really began to make white wines with typicity, a sense of place and real quality. Today red wine still dominates in volume, but Israeli white wines are coming back. They are of improved quality and of new interest to wine lovers.

NOW, DURING the festival of Shavuot, we are encouraged to eat dairy products. For a series of reasons, this has developed into becoming the white wine festival.

First, there is the timing. It comes at the dawn of the long, hot, relentless Israeli summer. Nothing better than white wines to combat those first *hamsins*.

Second, for many, dairy means cheese. The natural partner for cheese is wine, yet it is not red wine that goes best with cheese, as is assumed by many, but white wine.

So, the timing, the weather, culinary customs and current trends have all led to white wine being part of Shavuot.

Rosé has gate-crashed the party, too. If ever there was wine that symbolizes the Mediterranean for me, this is it. After the popular, but quite frankly not very high quality, Grenache Rosé disappeared, rosé went into the doldrums. People would avoid this style of wine like the plague. It symbolized the poor years quality-wise. In the past 10 years, there has been talk of a rosé comeback. Many wineries returned to rosé; some wineries even started to make comparatively expensive rosés. The turning point has come really only in the last few years, which have seen wine lovers, even connoisseurs, returning to rosé.

White wines and rosés, from dry to semi sweet, form my Shavuot recommendations.

ON SHAVUOT: White wine and cheese, please. (Skånska Matupplevelser/Flickr)





(Hagit Goren)

GALIL MOUNTAIN SAUVIGNON BLANC 2018. A Sauvignon Blanc from the Upper Galilee, made from a vineyard using coffee compost in a joint venture with Nespresso. It makes innovative public relations, but not sure it affects the wine though. However, it is a good value Sauvignon Blanc. Bright, aromas of tropical fruit and good acidity. Refreshing. NIS 45



(Photos: Courtesy)

JERUSALEM, MONTEFIORE WINDMILL SAUVIGNON BLANC 2018. A crisp, fragrant Sauvignon Blanc, with some untypical but pleasant flowery notes in the aroma. On the palate though, it tastes very true to the variety. Fresh & great value. It is produced by Jerusalem Wineries, whose innovative visitors center is at the Montefiore Windmill in Mishkenot Sha'ananim - Yemin Moshe, in the heart of Jerusalem. NIS 65

MUD HOUSE SAUVIGNON BLANC 2018. If you are a Sauvignon Blanc addict, then you may follow New Zealand. This has the aromatic concentration of tropical fruit, the great acidity and refreshing quality associated with the best New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs, but it is also a great price. Other recommended Kiwi Sauvignon Blancs are Matua, with its sky blue label, and Astrolabe. NIS 60



SEGAL FREE RUN CHARDONNAY 2018. The first signs of a quality upturn in the Barkan-Segal juggernaut, the largest winery in Israel, are a series of wines launched under the Segal label. This modern-style Free Run Chardonnay is well balanced with good fruit and pleasing, subdued notes of oak in the background, and succeeds because of the good acidity. Highly drinkable and not expensive. NIS 60



COVENANT ISRAEL BLUE C VIOGNIER 2018. Undoubtedly one of the finest Israeli Viogniers, with a striking blue capsule and large blue C on the label. It has classic Viognier notes, apricot, maybe white peach, has a pleasing mouth feel and, unlike many Viogniers, it has an excellent acidity. This Israeli winery, which sources fruit from the Upper Galilee and Golan Heights, is owned by the charismatic Jeff Morgan, whose Californian Covenant is one of the most celebrated wines in the kosher world. NIS 110

TABOR ADAMA ROUSSANNE 2018. A great white wine. Tabor Winery is really a white wine specialist. More herbal in aroma that fruity, with broad flavor, good complexity and a refreshing finish. It is one of the better wines from this variety I have tasted. Tabor has reverted to "ecological viticulture," reintroducing wildlife in their vineyards, preserving nature and the local environment. NIS 60



GOLAN HEIGHTS, MOUNT HERMON WHITE 2018. For so many years this has been a reliable banker, which never lets the side down. Crisp, dry, fragrant and refreshing. In the late 1980s, when I first came across it, it was called Golan Mount Hermon White. For many years it was under the brand Yarden. Now it is under the Hermon label. Whatever the name, Mount Hermon White always stands up to quality scrutiny, and represents better value than ever. NIS 30

TEPERBERG INSPIRE FAMITAGE 2018. This is a really pleasant, fruity, easy-drinking, nicely balanced wine. It is an intriguing blend of Dabouki, Sauvignon Blanc and Gewürztraminer. No one varietal character stands out, but it is very drinkable. Dabouki is one of those interesting Holy Land varieties that preceded all the international varieties here. NIS 75



(Ayal Keren)

CARMEL TWO VATS 2018. A very aromatic, grapy, semi dry blend made from Muscat, Gewürztraminer, Viognier and Colombard. More Muscat than Gewürz, but flavorful, tasty with pronounced sweetness. Recommended because I acknowledge there is a distinct demand for this sort of wine. NIS 55



(Ayal Keren)

HAYOTZER VIRTUOSO GEWÜRZTRAMINER 2017. A semi dry, classically aromatic Gewürztraminer with spicy notes. It is not too sweet and has a pleasant balancing acidity. Flavorful, yet focused. This is one of the finest in Israel from this increasingly popular variety. NIS 50



1848 SECOND GENERATION GEWÜRZTRAMINER 2018. This is newly released, very aromatic... and semi sweet (like Blue Nun.) Those that prefer more sweetness in their wines will love it. From the underrated 1848 Winery, a small winery, owned by a family that has been making wine for 170 years. NIS 60

YATIR ROSÉ 2018. One of the premium-style rosés, produced by one of Israel's leading wineries, made from Grenache, Mourvèdre and Tempranillo. It has a pale pink color, delicate berry fruit and piercing acidity. Refreshing just to look at it. Yatir Winery is situated at Tel Arad in the northeastern Negev. NIS 95

A cheese and wine party is a very simple way of celebrating wines, cut up some vegetables and invite some friends. White wines in Israel have never been better quality, and Shavuot is an opportunity to give them the place they deserve. ■

*The writer has advanced Israeli wines for over 30 years and is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine.
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