



SNOW-COVERED vineyard at Cremisan, the oldest and most famous Palestinian winery. (Cremisan Winery)



THE DABOUKI produced by Palestinian winery Domaine Kassis. (Domaine Kassis)

# KEEPING IT LOCAL



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

A decade ago, we knew there were local grape varieties, grown for centuries in the vineyards of the Holy Land, but we never thought of them as being wine grapes. Yet the wineries that were founded by Jewish families like Shor and Teperberg in the 19th century, used the same local varieties that we are talking about today, purchased from Arab-owned vineyards mainly in the Hebron area.

The indigenous varieties now being made into wine include Bittuni and Baladi for reds, and Dabouki, Hamdani (aka Marawi), Jandali and Zeini for the whites. These varieties survived the Ottoman Empire because they were sweet and tasty. It is as simple as that. They were used as table grapes, to make raisins, for creating a grape molasses (dibs), or distilling for arak. Local Jews and Christians always made wine, but it was a domestic affair, not an industry. Some have traced the mentions of words sounding like Hamdani

FADI BATARSEH, winemaker of Cremisan Wine Estate, checks the barrels. (Cremisan Winery)



and Jandali back to Talmudic times and then to the 16th century.

However, in those days vineyards were usually a mishmash of different varieties, without even being identified and separated. Vineyards were not the manicured gardens of today. In ancient times they more likely grew up trees, were trained on a pergola or sprawled along the ground. Furthermore, wines were described by place or style, not variety. However, there is no doubt that these varieties have been here for centuries.

All these varieties are still grown, particularly in the Hebron area. Barkan-Segal and Recanati Winery have also planted Marawi and Jandali, respectively in the Judean Hills and Upper Galilee. As for Dabouki, it is the indigenous variety that has always also been in Israel. Today, there are only a very few old vine Dabouki vineyards left in the Mt. Carmel area, Jezreel Valley, Lower Galilee and Judean Foothills.

The pioneer of indigenous varieties in our times is Cremisan Wine Estate from Beit Jalla, which is part of the Cremisan Monastery, founded in 1885. They

were the first to make varietal wines from these varieties from the 2008 vintage. Fadi Bartesah, a young Palestinian, studied in Italy, and wrote a thesis about the local varieties. He is now the manager and winemaker of the winery.

In Israel, the pioneer is Dr. Shibi Drori. He is also the winemaker of the Gvaot Winery, which is situated in the Samaritan mountains. They produce a couple of wines from indigenous varieties, but it is the research Dr. Drori is doing that is more significant. Since 2012 he has been gathering any local grape he could find, categorizing them, researching them and collecting data. He has found 12 varieties that may be suitable for making wine. He is growing these varieties, making



(LEFT TO right) Barkan Argaman; Feldstein Dabouki; Jezreel Valley Argaman; Segal Marawi; Gvaot Bittuni; 1848 Winery Argaman. (Photos: Wineries mentioned)

experimental wine at a micro-winery and continuing his groundbreaking research at Ariel University.

The first modern Israeli wine from ancient varieties was produced by Recanati Winery with the Marawi 2014. The launch of this wine created more international interest than ever before. The grapes were grown by a Palestinian grower on a Hebron pergola and the wine was made by an Israeli winemaker. It was certainly newsworthy.

I RECENTLY held a tasting of most of the wines made from local varieties. The main producers using local grape varieties today are 1848 Winery, Ariel Beyehuda, Barkan-Segal, Feldstein, Gvaot, Jezreel Valley, Recanati and Teperberg wineries from Israel and the Palestinian wineries Cremisan, Kassis, Philokalia and Taybeh.

Dabouki is a variety that may have its roots in Armenia. The word means “sticky” in Arabic, in the sweet sense. Once, Dabouki was for Israelis mainly a distilling grape. The wine produced from Dabouki can have a honeyed nose, with a touch of melon and be faintly floral. Overall it is relatively neutral. The Cremisan Star of Bethlehem Dabouki 2019 was the most balanced we tasted. The Feldstein Dabouki (sic) 2019 had the best acidity. I think highly of the Kassis Dabouki 2018, but it was a year older than the others I tasted and it showed. The Segal Kdumim Dabouki 2019 with more oak treatment than the others, finished last. (‘Kdumim’ meaning ancient, is the brand name in Israel. ‘Native’ is the name used for export.) In the category of “others,” Jezreel Valley Winery produces a super fun Pet-Nat (naturally sparkling) wine made from Dabouki, and Teperberg also has a blend with Dabouki, accompanied by Sauvignon Blanc and Gewurztraminer. It is under their Inspire label and is full-flavored and refreshing.

Marawi is a synonym of Hamdani. Traditionally, south of Jerusalem it is known as Hamdani, and west of Jerusalem the grape is referred to as Marawi. I find Marawi slightly savory and saline, a little fat, with delicate peach or apricot aromas. There are two Marawis in the marketplace. The Segal Kdumim Marawi 2019 is from a Bar Giora Vineyard, whilst the Recanati Marawi 2019 is from the Bethlehem area. Out of the two, we preferred the Recanati this time.

Jandali is a variety with more tropical aromas than Marawi, but less on the palate. Both Barkan and Gvaot have made varietal Jandalis, but it seems to be more successful as part of a blend. The Cremisan Star of Bethlehem Hamdani Jandali 2019 was the freshest and Gvaot Gofna Hamdani Jandali 2019 was a fuller bodied version. Both were the best white wines in the tasting.

The indigenous reds we tasted were the Recanati Bittuni 2019, Gvaot Gofna Bittuni 2019 and Cremisan Star of Bethlehem Baladi 2017. The Bittuni comes from

near Hebron and Baladi from the Bethlehem area. These are light-bodied wines, refreshing when served chilled. The Bittuni can have bright red fruit with raspberry aromas, somewhere in between a Gamay or a young Pinot Noir. Both have a well-defined, cranberry-like acidity and finish slightly short. They are wines to drink, rather than taste and are good “summer” or lunchtime wines. In our tasting the best was the Recanati Bittuni, followed by the Cremisan Baladi.

THE MOST Israeli variety is Argaman, because it was created here. Argaman was developed from a cross between Carignan and Souzao in the 1970s. The meaning of the word is crimson or deep purple. Winemaker Avi Feldstein, then of Segal Winery, was the pioneer who planted the variety in the Upper Galilee and launched a quality varietal Segal Rechesim Argaman from the 2006 vintage. When the 2008 won a gold medal in a major French wine tasting competition, Argaman was on the map.

Of the current Argamans in the market, there are two distinct styles. The first are serious, oak-aged quality wines. The second are light, fruity wines, which may be best served chilled. Jezreel Valley was a start-up winery founded in 2012, which from the beginning embraced local and “adopted varieties,” like Carignan. Their Jezreel Valley Argaman 2016 is from Givat Nili, in the northern coastal plain. The wine is deep, plush, oaky, with a bit of spice and an earthiness on the palate, which gives it character. The newest member to the Argaman club is 1848 Winery. This winery was founded by Yossi Shor, the eighth generation of the Shor family that founded Israel’s oldest winery in 1848. Their 1848 Winery Argaman 2017 is a single-vineyard wine from Ramat Sirin in the Galilee. The wine is New World in style, deep, ripe fruit and velvety, with a smooth texture and soft tannins. Both are good expressions of a quality Argaman. The 1848 is more pure, the Jezreel Valley expression is more characterful. Which you will prefer, will depend on personal preference. There was not much in it.

There are two examples of the lighter-style Argaman. Both are made by Barkan Winery. The Beta Argaman 2017 and Limited Edition Argaman 2018 (made for the Yayin b’Ir wine store chain) are similar, both with bright, crunchy fruit with pronounced acidity. They are good drinking wines, refreshing, perhaps best summarized as lunchtime wines. Certainly my experience is that these wines show better the younger they are. The main qualities of Argaman, apart from the color, are cherry fruit, a peppery character and a good acidity.

Another grape, not part of the tasting, that survived under the auspices of the Ottoman Empire is the Sultanina (aka Sultaniye in Turkey, Thompson Seedless in California and Sultana throughout the world), which



RECANTI WINERY’S Marawi and Bittuni, the first wines produced by an Israeli winery from these varieties. (Eli Prachter)

is still used in the Aegean region of Turkey to make wine. However it is mainly famous as a food grape and for making raisins. Vortman Winery made a wine from this variety in 2017 from its Shefaya Valley vineyard. It was flowery and fresh, interesting as a curiosity and certainly drinkable. Then there is the so-called Margalit Blanc, possibly a mutation of Cabernet Franc and Colombard, which occurred naturally in Margalit Winery’s vineyard, producing a new local white variety. This is blended with Chardonnay in a steely white wine called Optima.

I DON’T want to overrate the importance of scores, but some of these wines have garnered international recognition. The Kassis Dabouki, Recanati Marawi, Segal Marawi, Cremisan Hamdani Jandali and Jezreel Valley Argaman, have all scored 90 points in important publications, for what it’s worth.

At the moment we can say that wines produced from these varieties come only from the Holy Land, though because the Ottoman Empire was without today’s borders, I think it is quite possible they will be found in neighboring countries too. Many winemakers say we should concentrate on making the finest wines we can, and these will be from international varieties. The local aspect comes from the terroir. However, others are experimenting and seeing how far they can reach. Certainly worldwide there is a new fetish for local varieties that are either revived or newly discovered. Our region is no different. So the research and trials should continue and take us where it leads. There is no reason why we can’t have our own Malagousia (a variety saved, revived and now thriving in Greece.) At the same time, we should understand these indigenous varieties are not the finest wines Israel produces. Not by a long shot. To paraphrase Jancis Robinson MW, the world’s leading critic and wine writer: “We should not confuse interest with quality.” They are also as yet produced only in small, even tiny quantities.

However, if you want to taste wines from grapes that are part of the DNA of the land where they are grown, then you now have the option of drinking local.

Certainly we are going to hear a lot more of names such as Argaman, Dabouki and Marawi in the future.

*The writer is a wine industry insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years. He is referred to as ‘the English voice of Israeli wine.’*

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