

# HE ADOPTED CARIGNAN...

... and Carignan adopted him



MOMO SHMILOVICH pruning his Carignan vineyard. (Photos: Courtesy)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**N**o grape variety tells the story of Israeli wine quite like Carignan. It is part of the modern history of Israeli wine. It has been here from the beginning, from even before Baron Edmond de Rothschild's involvement.

The variety made aliyah in the 1870s, when the

Mikveh Israel Agricultural School imported cuttings from Europe. Previously, wineries had used indigenous Holy Land varieties grown by Arab farmers in Bethlehem and Hebron. This was the first time French varieties arrived in Israel. Owing to the similarities of climate between the South of France and Palestine, they brought Mediterranean varieties, including Carignan.

When the farming villages of Rishon Lezion and Zichron Ya'acov planted their first experimental vine-

yards in 1882-3, Carignan was one of the varieties. Only then, it was pronounced and written "Corignan" by the local growers. This incorrect local interpretation lasted for generations, and even today some growers pronounce the word this way.

After the experimentations of the late 19th century, the wine industry came to be dominated by two varieties in particular. Alicante was in those days more heavily planted than Carignan. This was known as Alicante Grenache. The better-known Alicante Bouschet



RECOMMENDED CARIGNANS  
(from left): Vitkin, Jezreel Valley,  
Vortman, Neve Yarak.

was also grown, but in far smaller quantities. I have no way of knowing whether the variety was in fact Grenache, but the Alicante- and Carignan-dominated local market based on inexpensive wines and sweet sacramental wines.

Following the founding of the State of Israel, the focus turned full-gear on Carignan. Why did this particular variety become so popular? The reason had nothing to do with quality. Carignan grew well in the hot humid coastal plains of Israel. The vineyards then were in the valleys surrounding the southern part of Mount Carmel and in the Judean Plain and foothills. It produced excellent yields. So, the growers were happy, being paid on quantity rather than quality. Furthermore, the variety was very versatile. It produced table wine, kiddush wine and grape juice to the standards then required.

There were attempts to improve the humble Carignan over the years. First, Ruby Cabernet (a cross between Cabernet Sauvignon x Carignan) and later, Argaman (Souzao x Carignan) were created in California and Israel respectively. Neither budged Carignan from its perch. In the 1970s, Carignan reached a peak, comprising no less than 55% of the varieties grown in Israel.

At the same time, Cabernet Sauvignon was making its impressive comeback. The Carmel Cabernet Sauvignon Special Reserve 1976 and Yarden Cabernet Sauvignons from 1983 onward hailed the return of the king of grapes and the start of the quality wine revolution here.

In the 1990s, there was still comparatively little Cabernet Sauvignon, but wineries realized it was a marketing asset. Then far more wines were labeled Cabernet than there was fruit, but there was no lack of Carignan. I remember tasting a Cabernet Sauvignon with Daniel Rogov, doyen of wine critics (ex *Jerusalem Post*), and he commented with typically wry humor, "That is the best Carignan I have ever tasted!"

In 1999, Margalit Winery the county's first quality boutique winery made the first quality wine from the Carignan grape variety. Unfortunately, the source of the fruit disappeared, so it was a one-time effort. However, it was a statement. A quality winery could make a fine wine from Carignan grapes.

Many vineyards of Carignan were grubbed up, not only in Israel but also in the South of France. By the 2000s, Cabernet Sauvignon overtook Carignan to become the largest planted variety in Israel.

THERE ARE a few Carignan heroes who raised the profile of the grape variety. The most significant pioneer of quality Carignan was Assaf Paz of Vitkin Winery. Bordeaux trained, he visited Priorat in Spain and was entranced by the wines made from Carignan he saw there. Working also for Carmel at Zichron Ya'acov Winery, he was able to have access to many Carignan vineyards in the Mount Carmel region. He had the

ambition, curiosity and vision to look beyond the run-down, unkept, haphazard vineyards before him. He looked at these high-yield vineyards producing fruit for grape juice and kiddush wine, and thought, "What if I drastically reduce yields with the intention of making a high-quality wine?" And he did, as the great success of the Vitkin Carignan, first made in 2002, showed. He is the father figure of quality Carignan in Israel and his 2015 is kosher for the first time. Any time you taste Carignan in Israel, this is the benchmark.

Somek Winery in Zichron Ya'acov is another Carignan specialist. Founded in 2003, this small boutique winery is owned by Barak Dahan, a grower with vineyards in the Hanadiv Valley, south of Zichron Ya'acov. His family has been growing Carignan for five generations, but he is the first of the family to produce a quality Carignan wine at the small winery he runs with his wife Hila. Barak is a hands-on grower with experience transmitted over generations, while Hila studied winemaking in Australia. Their Carignan is an individual expression, not always the cleanest, but brimming with character and terroir.

Arguably, the Carignan that reached the furthest in terms of recognition is the Recanati Wild Carignan. This resulted from an amazing story. Ido Lewinsohn, then a Recanati winemaker, saw a run-down, half-dead vineyard that looked doomed in the Judean Foothills in 2008. Being a young, creative winemaker with an imagination, he pricked up his ears and asked for the opportunity to make wine from it. Approval was given, the vineyard was saved and Recanati made a full-bodied, ripe fruit, oaky Carignan with earthy flavors. One of the characterful bush vines, almost on the ground, with flailing arms in all directions like an octopus, became immortalized on the label. The Carignan fits in with the winery's stated marketing policy of focusing on Mediterranean wines.

ONE OF my favorite Carignans is produced by Jezreel Valley Winery. The winery was founded in 2012 by entrepreneur Jacob Ner-David and Yehuda Nahar. They make arguably the best Argaman in Israel and their Carignan is deep, with attractive red fruit aromas, quite oaky, flavorful and complex with a nice acidity making a refreshing finish. The fruit comes from Shefaya, east of Zichron Ya'acov from a 45-year old vineyard. America-born, California-trained Ari Erle is the talented winemaker. Yehuda Nahar described to me the feeling of responsibility.

"As Israeli cuisine and chefs become known around the world, it is important that Israeli wine assumes an Israeli rather than merely international expression."

I have to say I was not certain about the winery in its early days, but I get the feeling their wine is improving every vintage and the winery is progressing with giant strides.

The best thing about the Vortman Winery is the

brehtaking view from the tasting room in the family home in Haifa, but that is not to denigrate the wine, which is not far behind. Vortman is one of Israel's most promising wineries. The owner/winemaker/grower is Hai Vortman. He makes great white wines, but his Vortman Carignan 2015 is an unsung hero: elegant with an enchanting bouquet, layers of complexity, hints of Mediterranean herbs and a satisfying finish. The wine also comes from a Shefaya vineyard.

THE NEWEST Carignan warrior may be found in Neve Yarak, a moshav near the southern reaches of the Sharon Plain. The moshav is an oasis of agriculture, with – and there is a pattern here – run-down, old vines. Momo Shmilovitch is a third-generation farmer/resident of Neve Yarak. He remembers the strong wine made by his grandfather and grew up helping his father in the fields. Momo worked in industrial design, but the wine bug grabbed him. He worked a few harvests at Margalit Winery. When he was offered the opportunity to save a vineyard planted in 1981 that was due to be grubbed up, he dove in and founded his Neve Yarak Winery. He has two old-vine Carignan vineyards. The vines are kept well ventilated by strong winds that channel toward the moshav from the sea. One of the vineyards has old vines all gently leaning one way as if in mid-sway, rather like old men leaning on sticks. Nearly 40 years of standing in the winds does that to you. I am not aware of other vineyards in the Sharon Plain.

Momo is a serial tinkerer. To satisfy his curiosity and

not beyond making his small production, garagiste wine in six different ways. Why? Because he can. He then follows the development of his Carignan, with different nuances so small as to be unimportant to the consumer. For him, it is a reason for being. The Neve Yarak Carignan 2016 has an attractive blueberry aroma, with a hint of minty eucalyptus. It has a nice complexity but does not shout too loudly. Everything is in proportion.

Momo Shmilovitch adopted Carignan, and Neve Yarak Carignan adopted him. He hosts a Carignan Day. The next one will take place at Neve Yarak on June 6; it will be of interest to wine lovers, connoisseurs and Carignan fanatics.

The ABC movement (Anything But Cabernet) adherents are pleased to have the option of drinking wines from a variety, which is less international, that has already been here for 140 years. A kind of honorary Israeli. Anyway, who wants to drink Cabernet and Merlot all the time? ■

*The writer has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years and is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wines. He is the wine writer for The Jerusalem Post. [www.adammon-tefiore.com](http://www.adammon-tefiore.com)*