

The French connection



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The first French revolution in Israeli wine came at the end of the 19th century when Baron Edmond de Rothschild founded a modern wine industry. He was a Paris banker and winery owner, and he invested millions in planting vineyards in the 1880s and building wineries with deep underground cellars in the 1890s.

He used French administrators, the most experienced French agronomists and French winemakers. The accounts were kept in French, and the wine-growers' cooperative he set up was even registered in French: Société Cooperative Vigneronne des Grandes Caves.

So undoubtedly the Israeli wine industry was revived after 2,000 years owing to French finance and French expertise. Israeli wine was built on French roots.

Now a new French revolution is in the air. In recent years many French people have made aliya. For example, even the leafy, quiet Ra'anana, where I live, has developed a French accent. French can be heard freely on the streets, and there is a new sprinkling of French retail shops, butchers, French cafés with café au lait, authentic baguettes and light, fluffy croissants. *Vive la France!*

You would not expect our wine trade not to be affected by this development. After all, French Jews are strong Zionists, they love the Land of Israel, and they have the world's most famous wine culture coursing through their veins. So it will not surprise you to know that some French entrepreneurs have invested in Israeli wine.



ONE OF the best of the new wineries is Domaine Seror, a particularly high-quality initiative founded by four friends – the entrepreneurs and businessmen Claude Seror, Michael Golan, Jean David Benichou and Jacques Nataf – who wanted to combine French wine culture with Israeli agriculture and technology and their desire to contribute to the Land of Israel.

The winery is based at Avnei Eitan on the southern Golan Heights, overlooking Lake Kinneret, where experienced farmer turned vineyard owner Yuval Matzliah manages the vineyards and the winery.

Matzliah is an irrepressible survivor of the Gush Katif evacuation. Thankfully, he and his family have found a corner of Israel they can call home, in this case the wine country that is the Golan Heights. On meeting him, you will think he is proud of his wine... until you hear him talk about his olive oil!

The experienced and talented Itay Lahat is the winemaker. He once worked for Barkan as a winemaker viticulturist, and he has since become the leading and most sought-after wine consultant in Israel. Seror produces some very fine wines.

The L'Or Rosé is an ideal rosé. It is pale salmon pink, with delicate fruit, and a clean, crisp, refreshing finish. The Claude Seror Rouge is a blend of mainly Cabernet Sauvignon balanced by Merlot and a little Syrah. The wine is deep-colored with black fruit aromas, a great structure supported by ripe tannins, soft oak flavors and a long, well-balanced finish. Best of all is their Syrah, which must be one of the best in the country. Deep, complex, mouth-filling, with notes of leather and spice and a long flavorful finish.

JACQUES CAPSOUTO is a Frenchman who settled in America and opened the Capsouto Frères restaurant in Manhattan. This became a fixture for over 30 years and was famous for two things, among others. Firstly, the restaurant was a must-visit venue for its soufflés, and secondly for being an ambassador for Israeli wines. It was the first nonkosher restaurant to give a focus to Israeli wines, putting them on the wine list and promoting them by the glass.

Two unkind cuts brought this institution to an end. Hurricane Sandy destroyed the restaurant; and one of Capsouto's brothers, a partner in the business, died.

So at the age of 70, when most start winding down and taking things easier, Capsouto decided to found a winery in Israel. He called it Jacques Capsouto Vignobles. He planted a beautiful vineyard on the slopes near Peki'in and made wine at Hosen. Thus he became a pioneer of the Western Galilee. His winemaker is Eran Israeli, who heads the Ohalo Winemaking School at Katzrin College, and he engaged Jean Luc Colombo, an icon of the Rhone, as his consultant.

He planted only grapes from the southern Rhone. There are no Cabernets, Merlots, Chardonnays or Sauvignons at his winery. This is because he firmly believes this is the direction our winemaking future should take, and he believes in making only blends. His labels are dead ringers for Côtes du Rhône labels in look, and he writes "Côtes de Galilee Village" and the explanation "Mediterranean Blends" on the labels. Each wine is named after a member of his family, including his parents and brothers – Eva, Albert, Samuel and Marco.



DOMAINE NETOFA'S beautiful tasting room in the Lower Galilee.

JACQUES CAPSOUTO in his Western Galilee vineyard. (Photos: Courtesy)



Claude Seror Ramat Hagolan.



La Citadelle de Diamont's Rosé.



Capsouto's Cuvee Marco.



Claude Seror Syrah.

The Cuvée Eva Rosé is especially good. It is made from Cinsault, Grenache and Mourvèdre. A beautiful onion-skin color with delicate aromas and a piercing acidity. The Cuvée Albert Blanc, made from Marsanne, Roussanne and Clairette, is a complex white with a grassy, herbal character. The Samuel Rouge is the essence of a Mediterranean blend: fruity, but not in your face; chewy and refreshing. It is made from Mourvèdre, Grenache and Cunoise grapes.

PIERRE MIODOWNIK was the winemaker for Royal Wines Europe, making kosher wines in France, Spain and Portugal. Royal Wine is the most international producer of kosher wines and the largest importer and distributor of kosher wines in the world. He was one of the main figures responsible for bringing kosher wines to the famous wineries of Europe.

He made aliya with his seven children and planted a vineyard in the Ein Dor region, near Mount Tabor in the Lower Galilee, and makes his wine near Mount Meron in the Upper Galilee. He also chose to avoid the classic varieties, going for Rhone varieties but also varieties from Spain, Portugal and the Loire Valley. Netofa Winery, centered at Mitzpe Netofa, has one of the most luxurious wine tasting rooms in the country. Plush armchairs and its situation next to a synagogue give the room a unique atmosphere.

I especially like the Domaine Netofa White, made from Chenin Blanc, preferring the leaner unoaked version to the oak-aged one, and the Latour Netofa Red, an elegant, fresh blend of Syrah and Mourvèdre. The prestige Dor Syrah is a limited edition production and it is a big wine, powerful, full-bodied, with very

concentrated fruit flavors backed by vanilla from oak aging. It packs a punch. The port-style fortified dessert wines are also excellent. There is a less expensive Ruby style and a more exclusive LBV style. Both are worthy, but dependent on your budget.

FURTHER SOUTH is another French Israeli initiative. This is La Citadelle de Diamont, which is owned by businessman Laurent Emsellem in partnership with David Marciano. It replaced the Titara Winery in Kfar Ruth, not far from Modi'in. Its winemaker is Patrick Hababou, the former owner of Titara.

Its prime objective is to make a French-style rosé. Rosé is looked down upon in many parts of the world as neither white nor red. However, in France, rosé has a quality status not found anywhere else in the world. Provence is a region famous above all for its rosé, and the Tavel Rosé and Anjou Rosé are other famous rosés from the Rhone & Loire, respectively.

What is innovative about this winery is that it was created with rosé in mind, which should be praised. This is totally appropriate in Israel of today, where rosé is "in." It has finally been accepted as being perfect for our region, the eastern Mediterranean, also for our Mediterranean climate and our Mediterranean Middle East fusion cuisine. No one should feel inferior anymore for having put a rosé on the table. It is a symbol of the Mediterranean.

La Citadelle's objective is to make rosé from Grenache and Cinsault grapes in the style of the southern French rosé. I tasted their Mademoiselle Rosé and it was good. This is something they have in common with Domaine Seror and Jacques Capsouto Vignobles.

It was pale-colored, steely, with refreshing acidity. The reds were less good, but maybe I got unlucky with problem bottles, as can happen.

This is the most ostentatious of the wineries, with a French accent with very showy labels and a very loud shelf presence, but paradoxically it is the most reluctant to give information. The proof of the pudding is of course in the glass.

WE ALSO have some very fine French-born winemakers. Philippe Lichtenstein was head winemaker of Zichron Ya'acov Cellars and is now winemaker of Arza Winery, the fifth-largest winery in Israel, and of the newly launched Hayotzer Winery. Olivier Fratty is a winemaker at Teperberg Winery, the fourth-largest winery and largest family winery in Israel. Both Hayotzer and Teperberg are making very fine wines today. My favorites are the Hayotzer Lyrica GSM and Teperberg Legacy Cabernet Franc.

Of course, the eastern Mediterranean is the cradle of wine culture, and wine was made here thousands of years before the vine even reached France. However, France is, without doubt, far and away the No. 1 country for fine wines today.

It is therefore fitting that we owe the revival of our wine industry to a Frenchman, and that the French connection is strengthening, as French winery owners and winemakers are again contributing to Israeli wine. *Chapeau! À votre santé!* ■

The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years, and is known as "the English voice of Israeli wine."
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