

Return to Sepharad



CLOS MESORAH is the Cohen family's flagship wine.

ELVI FOUNDERS-OWNERS Anne & Moises Cohen in the beautiful vineyards of Priorat. (Photos: Elvi Wines)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

There are three hubs of kosher winemaking in the world.

First and foremost, there is Israel. Here, roughly 55% of the wineries are kosher, but paradoxically over 95% of the wine made is classified kosher. The explanation for this conundrum is that all the medium to large wineries make kosher wine.

Zion Winery from 1848 was the first, but it was Carmel from 1882 onward that became the symbol of kosher winemaking worldwide. A hundred years later, it was the Golan Heights Winery (from 1983) that took kosher winemaking to a higher-quality level.

Then there is California. Kosher winemaking existed for the giant liquid religion brands like Manischewitz, Mogen Dovid, and Kedem. Quality winemaking arrived with Hagafen from 1979 and then, from 1985, Herzog Wine Cellars took it to another level in terms of scale.

Finally there is France. French kosher table wines were made in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but the watershed moment occurred in 1986 when Baron Edmond de Rothschild (grandson of the founder of the modern Israeli wine industry) became the first Rothschild to make a kosher cuvée.

Since then, the kosher wine world has exploded. There is virtually no country that does not make kosher wine, and some of the best wineries in the world make kosher cuvées.

If you make a kosher wine in a non-kosher winery, you have to make your selections of rows, plots, and when to harvest in advance so you can invite the kosher crew to

come at exactly the right time. Without them, you can't make the wine.

In making their regular wines, decisions are made after exhaustive tastings of barrels from the different vineyards or blocks, toward the end of the process. For the kosher cuvée, the decisions have to be made in advance. Therefore, there is an obvious benefit to have a kosher winery making a wine rather than a non-kosher winery making a kosher cuvée.

HOWEVER, DESPITE the sea of kosher wine being made in Europe, there are only four wineries in France, Italy, and Spain that are kosher all the way, from the roots up. Two of them are in Italy.

The Spanish winery was the creation of a scientist and an artist. It was the first Jewish-owned kosher winery in Spain since the Inquisition expulsion in 1492. It was owned by a Sephardi family who returned to their homeland.

The scientist was Moises Cohen, who hailed from Casablanca, Morocco. At the age of 17, he made *aliyah*, went to study agricultural engineering at the Technion in Haifa, and ended up in Catalonia, Spain, working in agriculture and water management. His expertise took him to wine, and he began to be a valued consultant to those growing the grape. Some reputed wineries also started seeking his service. The contacts he made would stand him in good stead later on.

The artist was Anne Aleta, who hailed from Toulouse, France. She studied history of art and became a qualified sommelier. She and Moises were already a couple and decided to become partners in wine as well.

This partnership of the scientist with his nose in the vineyard and the artist with her nose in the glass coincided with a new breed of kosher wine mavens and the revival of Priorat and Montsant in Spain as wine regions

of interest for wine lovers.

In 2003, they founded Elvi Wines, which combines the words for "God" (*El*) and "wine" (*vino*). The company logo is the boat which the Jews used to flee Spain in 1492, when they gathered their belongings and went to other destinations in the Mediterranean. These days, the boat symbolizes Elvi's *raison d'être*, which is to take the consumer on a journey to different regions of Spain.

ELVI IS an umbrella company showcasing different wine regions. These include Montsant and Priorat, where Carinena and Garnacha grapes thrive; Rioja, arguably the most famous Spanish appellation; La Mancha, one of the largest continuous wine regions in the world; Alella, on the coast; and Cava, home of Spain's most famous sparkling wines.

Today, they make just under 20 wines in six different appellations in Spain. The wineries they work with are invariably owned by families with whom Moises has consulted over the years. They have formed long-term partnerships with each and have used the same vineyards for over 15 years, so there is continuity.

Elvi wines are as sustainable, natural, and organic as nature allows, without affecting the pursuit of quality. There is a synchronization of values, professionalism, and quality objectives. They export to some 20 countries, and often the wines are marketed as Spanish wines, without the kosher connection being mentioned.

The jewel in the crown is their own Clos Mesorah estate, with a walled vineyard and old gnarled vines. They called it Clos, the French word for "enclosure," and Mesorah, the Hebrew word for "tradition." The family lives in Barcelona, but Clos Mesorah is just an hour and a half away. This was the holiday home that their children remember from the time they were kids.

Elvi Wines markets Spanish regional wines, without unnecessarily falling back on international grapes. It



TENDING TO the vines in Priorat, which will go into their EL26 wine.



THE CENTURY-OLD Carignan in the family estate is ready for harvest.

is the right move but also a brave one, as the kosher consumer is wedded to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to an exaggerated degree.

ONE MAJOR problem among wineries is the change of generations. Some, like Domaine du Castel, are seamlessly passing the torch to the next generation. Others, like Agur Winery, have brought in new partners whose views and ideology perfectly mesh with those of the founder.

Elvi Wines has no such problems. The next generation is already heavily involved and highly visible. Leah, daughter of Moises and Anne, has studied winemaking and recently graduated in oenology. The founders' son, David, has taken to the wine trade like a whirlwind. He has become the foreign minister marketing the family wines very vocally and fluently. He seems to be everywhere, and he tells the family story and explains the philosophy of making Spanish wines, which just happen to be kosher.

He speaks very fast like an Energizer bunny (or Duracell bunny, depending on where you live) on steroids. Often, it seems like he begins a new sentence before finishing the previous one. It is as though he is expecting you any minute to cut him off in his prime, and he has to tick off as many points as possible before you do. He certainly has a good story, and it comes in waves.

His mother, Anne, the CEO of the company, is the power behind the throne. She is the one with knowledge and passion about wine, but she is more behind the scenes and not up front. His father, Moises, is quieter, more judicious with his words, more academic with his approach. He is much loved, exuding authenticity, but he is more the reserved gentleman and not a natural marketer. As for David, his friendly personality and passion shine through, and his in-

volvement clearly makes the family business more complete.

Their range of wines begins with an ever-so tasty Sintonia Sangria. This is a wine which reflects the direction of the younger generation. In fact, it was crafted by David and Leah using Vina Encina wine as a base mixed with 100% natural fruit essences. It is fun, slightly irreverent, tasty and gluggable... and low alcohol – but beware, it is too easy to quaff, and the alcohol can be hiding in the corner and catch up with you later.

Sangria for me reflects a mood, and this is one of the more authentic ones I have tasted. There is a red and a white, and I must say I preferred the red. You can drink it straight or use it as a base to add your own fruit or recipe. There is a casual drinking occasion where Sangria is exactly the right thing to drink. I think they have done a good job with this product, which reaches way beyond the kosher market.

THE VINA ENCINA label represents great value wines from La Mancha. These are good, very drinkable, approachable, and well made. My favorites were the fresh fragrant white and a fruity approachable Tempranillo.

Herenza Blanco (previously known as Invita) is a blend of the local variety Pansa Blanca and the international variety Sauvignon Blanc from the sandy coastal Alella region. It is refreshing, aromatic, smoky, mineral, flavorful, savory, and beautifully crisp.

The Herenza (meaning “heritage”) label is more well known in their range of Riojas. I tasted the range, each of which is a separate single vineyard wine, from the entry level semi-Crianza, to the Crianza, then the Reserva, up to their prestigious, oaky Gran Reserva. All their Riojas are good, and I thought the better wines had good oak treatment; but funnily enough, the one

I liked the most was the Herenza Semi Crianza, which is aged for only six months in oak. It had good fruit and a refreshing character that demanded another sip. Quite apart from anything else, it is the least expensive Rioja, and to me it represents the best value.

The king of the castle is the Clos Mesorah. I tasted the 2021, which is made from 100-year-old Carinena (Carignan) vines with Garnacha (Grenache) and Syrah. It is the epitome of elegance, with red fruits, cherries, tar, and spice, with a hint of herbs in the background. It was a lovely wine and quite clearly the best one I tasted.

The top of the range of the winery is the rare and expensive Sublim. I also tasted the EL26, their prestige wine from Priorat, which is a blend of Grenache and Carignan. It was pretty good, but for me the Clos Mesorah was top dog.

Elvi has conquered six regions. Are more on the company's list? I hope so. If the answer is positive, let's hope they consider sherry. As a sherry lover (I am a Brit, so what do you expect?), it would be excellent to have a consistent, ongoing kosher expression.

Elvi owns the only kosher winery in Spain and one of only four in the whole of Europe. So what are they doing? Opening another winery in Priorat!

How wonderful it is that these wandering Sephardim have returned to Spain after a journey of 500 years in order to make wine.

Anyone know the equivalent of *I'chaim* in Ladino? It's *saludosos*. ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 38 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine.

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