

THE GOLANI whiskeys lie in casks, maturing silently. (Golani Distillery)

CELEBRATING IN THE GOLAN



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

In the late 1980s, I came to an Israel which was somewhat limited in terms of its alcoholic beverages. In wine, Carmel Mizrahi was a monopoly with 75% of the market. Then, Selected was its entry-level brand, and Rothschild its prestige label. Regarding beer, Tempo Brewery was an even bigger monopoly, with main brands Goldstar, Maccabee, and Nesher. As for spirits and liqueurs, the big names were Elite Arak and Stock 84 Brandy.

Most of the spirits were made by the big wineries: Carmel, Barkan, Eliaz, and Askalon-Segal. All the wineries made spirits, with one notable exception. The reasonably new Golan Heights Winery decided, from the start, to concentrate on quality table wines. You may remember Vodka Stopka, Keglevich, Vodka Gold, Captain Rum, Lord Gin, and Tehila (imitation tequila). There were also Carmel and Stock vermouths, whose chief benefits were that they were kosher; along with Amadeus liqueurs. The most successful spirits in terms of quality were the brandies produced by Carmel and Tishbi, which won some major awards. The internationally known liqueur was the chocolate-orange Sabra, produced by Carmel on behalf of Seagram's.

Although the quality wine revolution began with Golan, it was not until the 1990s that the boutique winery revolution really got underway. This was led by wineries with names that were to become part of our

wine history, such as Margalit Winery, Domaine du Castel, and Tzora Vineyards.

The micro-brewery revolution began in the 2000s. Dancing Camel is the first name that comes to mind, but others like Golan, Jems, Malka, and Negev followed. A new craft distillery industry started in the 2010s. It was preceded by the pioneering Jullius Distillery, but others, like Golani, Milk & Honey, Pelter, and Yerushalmi, followed with whiskeys and gins.

Later, Thinkers was founded in Jerusalem, producing vodka and gin. The 2020s have seen a new awakening of vermouths, most notably the handcrafted Vedetta.

TODAY WE are in a different place. All the big, important global brands are here, and Israel is showcasing its own identity with quality, wines, beers, and spirits. Funnily enough, the best-selling brands in each category remain the same. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Carmel Selected, Tempo's Goldstar, and Elite Arak lead the way as they always did. However, each alcohol category is currently displaying individuality, character, variety, and quality via new developments and start-ups.

The first light dawned with the founding of Golan Heights Winery in 1983. This was the first time an Israeli winery really wanted to make high-quality wine and took the steps to achieve it. I was invited to the Golan Heights Winery for its 40th-anniversary party and decided to make a day of it by visiting a boutique winery, micro-brewery, and craft distillery to celebrate how far Golan has come since those early days of wine



THESE ARE the stills where the distillation takes place in Katzrin (top). (Golani Distillery)

DAVID ZIBELL is the pioneering owner of three distilleries: Golani, Katzrin, and Yerushalmi. (Golani Distillery)

pioneering.

I love visiting the Golan Heights. It really is like traveling abroad. When you cross the Jordan River and begin to climb, you feel as if you are on holiday. The Golan Heights is in the northeast of Israel, bordering Syria. It is a volcanic plateau overlooked by the impressive snow-covered Mount Hermon and, in turn, overlooks the beautiful Sea of Galilee.

I started by visiting one of our most promising young wineries. Mika Winery is situated at Natur in southern Golan. I had been there over a year ago, but this was an opportunity to taste the whites again, and the reds for the first time. This winery was founded by a special lady, Mika Ran Mandel. A mother of six children, she bought a farm and built their own home, but something was missing for Mandel, born into an agricultural family of farmers and vineyard owners in the mountains of Samaria.



Clockwise from top L:

THE BAZELET range of beers from the Golan Brewery, at Katzrin in central Golan. (Adam Montefiore)

THE WINES of Mika Winery, situated at Natur in southern Golan. (Mika Winery)

GOLANI UNICASK is a single cask speciality from the Golani Distillery. (Golani Distillery)

claim to be the first, depending on the criteria.

Zibell has the palate and perfectionism of the chef he once was, the business smarts of someone who was in real estate, and the refined culture of someone with roots in France. Golani's core business is its range of whiskeys. I liked the Golani Vino 5 Year Old whiskey best, but the Golani Unicask Nectar was also special.

However, we did not only taste whiskeys, as Zibell generously unleashed the full range of products for us. Passionate in a thorough, thoughtful way, he is absorbed by his roles as master distiller, owner, and CEO, which basically covers everything. He is matched by Alona, who really is a force of nature and the heart and spirit of the winery. Alona is the queen of the visitors' center, and hearing an explanation from her can turn even an abstemious, anti-alcohol crowd into fascinated listeners, prepared to taste anything. Together they are the blend that is the essence of Golani Distillery. I liked the rich fruit cake XO Brandy (Fine du Golan), loved the superb grappa (Golanite Gafta) with lifted aromas, and really appreciated an excellent arak (Green Anise Arak).

Zibell is particularly proud of his absinthe, produced in homage to his great-grandmother, who had an absinthe bar in France.

AROUND THE corner is the Golan Brewery, founded in 2006. Israel is today dominated by two large breweries – Carlsberg Israel and Tempo. The craft brewery revolution really began in the early 2000s. Golan Brewery was one of many small operations that sprang up offering small production beers of character and individuality. Their core list of beers is produced under the Bazelet label. (Basalt is the black stone that may be seen all over the Golan.) The brewery is also a meat restaurant and a great place to grab a meal. It is essential to eat something if your day is spent tasting wine, beer, and spirits – and their food is good. You can purchase a taster's selection of the different beers to decide what you like. For me, it was not that difficult. I liked the Pilsener and IPA best of all. The other beers tasted were a wheat beer, an ale, and a Double Bock. Certainly, it was a good pit stop.

In the evening, I joined the grand 40th anniversary celebrations at the Golan Heights Winery, founded in 1983. This is where it all began. They held a wonderful event. How great it was to visit the Golan 40 years on and experience how our domestic wine, beer, and spirits industries have developed since then.

The writer is a wine industry insider turned wine writer, who has promoted Israeli wines for 35 years. He is referred to as 'the English voice of Israeli wine'. adammontefiore.com

She dived into the wine business by joining Pelter Winery and gaining experience looking after its vineyards. Eventually, she decided to go it alone and founded her own winery. Now they produce up to 30,000 bottles a year. Their white wines and rosé are outstanding. On both visits, my favorite wine was the Sauvignon Blanc Roussanne. The rosé ticks all the boxes. Mandel also produces a Riesling, a dry Gewurztraminer, and an oaky Chardonnay – all finely made.

Of the reds, my favorite by far was the silky, focused, and elegant Petit Verdot. Most interesting was the light fruity Grenache. I also enjoyed the Cinsault, rare in Israel, which is an excellent summer wine.

Mandel is soft-spoken and modest, with underlying determination and perfectionism that slowly become apparent. She knows exactly what she wants and tends to achieve it. She planted her own vineyard at Tel Phares on the Golan and enjoys personally selecting the best grapes. She believes Samaria is best for Bordeaux varieties; Upper Galilee for Sauvignon Blanc; and the aromatic varieties such as Riesling and Gewurztraminer are best from the Golan Heights. As I was there to celebrate 40 years of wine, it was pleasing to see the infusion of new wineries.

The Golan Heights has a great wine route these days, ranging from Chateau Golan in the South to Odem Mountain Winery in the North. When you visit, be sure to add Mika Winery to your list.

WE THEN drove north to Katzrin in central Golan. There we visited the Golani Distillery, a start-up founded by David Zibell and his wife, Alona, in 2014. Zibell was warm, welcoming, and charming – and generously shared a great deal of his time as we tasted through the range.

He made *aliyah* from Montreal, Canada, with the express idea of establishing a distillery. In the previous 15 years, Israel had moved on from brandy into a country of whiskey drinkers. This fit in with the trend that turned whiskey – and Scotch whiskey in particular – into the chosen spirit of the Jewish people. Jews went to *shul* and spent a lot of time in Kiddush clubs, enjoying discussions on the merits of single malt whiskeys as much as dissecting and discussing the Talmud. The only thing we did not do in Israel was make the stuff.

Well, Zibell was one of those whiskey mavens who had a far-off dream to become Israel's first whiskey distiller. This he honed into a practical vision, which he achieved with clarity of purpose and great determination. Whereas most people making *aliyah* stuff their container with home necessities, Zibell sent over distilling equipment. Although others such as Pelter and Milk & Honey had similar ideas at the same time, Zibell was not to be denied.

He founded his distillery in 2014 in Katzrin and now owns three distilleries. Golani is his baby, producing Israeli whiskey. He aims to make his whiskey a totally Israeli production. He uses local grains – wheat and barley – local spring and well water and matures his spirit in casks previously used to age the famous wines of the Golan Heights. They toast the casks themselves. Zibell also produces kosher for Passover spirits like gin and arak at the nearby Katzrin Distillery.

At the Yerushalmi Distillery, a later start-up joint venture founded in Beit Shemesh, he makes peated whiskey and rums. There is a debate about which distillery made the first whiskey. Golani was the first to produce a new make (freshly distilled and unaged) whiskey, whereas Milk & Honey was the first to produce a whiskey that was matured for three years. Both can

