

# LION OF THE NEGEV FOREST



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**Y**atir Winery was founded in 2000 at Tel Arad in the northeastern Negev. It is Israel's leading winery in the southern desert region.

The winery overlooks the desert Ramat Arad vineyard and is overlooked by the Tel Arad Citadel, an archaeological site with 3,000 years of history. Wine was part of the story even then. An ancient papyrus was found there with an important message scratched on it by a soldier: "If there is wine, send quantity." This was 2,600 years ago!

Ramat Arad, the first modern vineyard in the Negev, was planted in 1988. The first Negev wine in the modern era was a Carmel Merlot from the 1992 vintage. The vineyard is situated 500 meters

above sea level. By the mid-1990s, a young engineer had a career change and decided to go into agriculture. He became, among other things, a grower of table grapes. His name was Ya'acov Ben-Dor.

He had the idea of planting wine grapes and had early dreams of possibly building a winery. Some growers rallied to the cause, and the first wine vineyards were planted in 1996-1997 in the Yatir Forest.

They found a willing partner in Carmel Winery, Israel's largest winery. Yatir Winery was founded by a joint venture that originally comprised 50% of the local grape growers of Gadash Hebron and 50% of Carmel Winery; but before long, Carmel became the full owners. Ben-Dor was made the general manager from the start.

The first year, the Cabernet Sauvignon



THE HEART and soul of Yatir Winery (from L): Winemaker Eran Goldwasser; export manager Etti Edri; and CEO Ya'acov Ben-Dor. (David Silverman)

THE WINERY'S Visitors' Center is overlooked by the Tel Arad Citadel and is alongside the Ramat Arad vineyards. (David Silverman)

grown in the Ramat Arad vineyard was good, but not good enough for the high standards expected of Yatir. So the wine was launched in a fancy tall bottle by Carmel as a single vineyard wine. It was called Ramat Arad Cabernet Sauvignon 2000 and was the first dawn in the Carmel revival that would follow, but the wine itself was made by Eran Goldwasser, the winemaker of Yatir Winery.

In fact, Yatir wines were not launched until 2004. Baruch Naeh designed the original and very stylish logo, which to me has a Japanese look. The lion on the label represents the Lion of Judah.

YATIR WINERY'S wines come exclusively from its high-elevation vineyards in the Yatir Forest, which are only 10 minutes away from the winery.

Yatir Forest is the southern tip of the Judean Hills. This is Israel's largest planted forest, established in 1964. The driving force behind it was Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, who suggested planting a forest to impede the expanding desert.

Experts told him that it would not be possible because trees would not grow there. Ben-Gurion's reaction was: "Change the experts!" They did, and the forest now produces a unique terroir for Yatir Winery's high-attitude vineyards, which rise from 600 to 900 m.

above sea level.

The forest is the meeting place between the Judean Hills, the Negev Desert, and the Judean Desert. Today, there are hundreds of ancient wine presses in the Yatir Forest, and hikers can explore caves where wine amphorae were stored. There is no doubt that the founding of Yatir renewed a winemaking tradition from ancient times.

The winery produces three levels of wines. At the top of the line is Yatir Forest, a Bordeaux blend based mainly on Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. This is its flagship wine.

A secondary level is taken by Yatir Creek Red (mainly Syrah) and White (mainly Roussanne and Grenache Blanc), and Yatir Petit Verdot, the only varietal wine the winery still makes. The winemaker prefers blends, believing they better show the Yatir terroir.

The entry-level of the winery is Mount Amasa. Under this label, there is a red (mainly a blend of Cabernet and Syrah, but with seven grape varieties in all), a white (mainly Viognier and Roussanne), and a rosé.

A few years ago, Yatir Winery launched a second brand called Darom by Yatir. *Darom* is the Hebrew word for "south." The three wines launched – a red, a white, and a rosé – were less expensive than the regular Yatir wines. Furthermore, as the name suggests, the grapes



YATIR VINTAGES (from L): Yatir Forest; Yatir Creek; Yatir Goblet; Darom Rosé; Darom White. (Bottle photos: Eyal Keren)

are sourced from the South. This refers to Ramat Arad, Mitzpe Ramon, what the IPEVO Israel wine map refers to as the Negev-Judea region, and the southern-most part of the region of Judea.

LIKE ALL smaller wineries, Yatir is a combination of the wine, the place, and the people.

Three people in particular have been the heart and soul of the winery from the beginning. Ben-Dor is a gentle individual, with a deep love of both agriculture and the region. He has a broad knowledge of the Bible, Judaism, and the local nature. He combines all three, along with grape growing and wines, into an enticing blend.

Listening to him is always absorbing and fascinating. He is incapable of not sharing his overflowing enthusiasm and excitement, quoting sources, pointing out flora and fauna, and telling stories that bring visitors into the atmosphere of the region.

If you are driving with him from the winery to the vineyards, he is likely to stop the bus or car without warning and rush to an unseen spot you are passing to point out a rare flower or animal special to the region. He will then give this object life by enthusiastically explaining its uniqueness.

A tour with him is like no other. Passion exudes from every pore, but like a great teacher, he is a master at drop-

ping the right anecdote at the most appropriate time to provide context to his explanation. He succeeds in strengthening the winery's connection to its own terroir, giving the winery a sense of place, while connecting today's story with wine in ancient times.

Goldwasser is the very talented winemaker. He studied in Australia and had winemaking experience there before joining the Carmel Winery. Almost immediately, he took on the Yatir Winery project, joining even before the very first wines were made. He has been there ever since. Goldwasser has a quiet confidence and an inner independence. He knows his own mind and will not be diverted from his path, which he follows with conviction.

I always feel he watches the world around him with faint amusement. It's hard to peel his outer onion skin and get to what he really thinks. However, he is one of our finest winemakers, up to date on the latest winemaking advancements, and not afraid to learn from others. It is a good combination.

His confidence should not be regarded as inflexibility. As a winemaker, it is amazing how he has grown, developed, and changed over two and a half decades. Israeli wine and the wine-knowledgeable consumer have changed too, but Goldwasser and the Yatir Winery are usually ahead of the curve.

The third is Etti Edri. She fills all

the gaps not covered by Ben-Dor and Goldwasser, keeping the engine running, but to the visitor she was the hostess whose warmth, enthusiasm, and professionalism enveloped guests arriving at the winery. Every detail was prepared with great style, and nothing was too much trouble. The *mise en place* of a tasting was exemplary. Standards were the highest. Edri would never do the minimum when she could do the maximum.

Israeli or incoming tourists who visit the winery are always bowled over by the smiling welcome. In recent years, Edri has become the export manager, representing both Carmel and Yatir overseas with her enthusiasm and professionalism.

ALTHOUGH THE Yatir Winery is a wholly owned subsidiary of Carmel – the country's historic winery – the divisions of labor are very clear: Everything within the gates of Yatir's winery and vineyards is the exclusive responsibility of Yatir Winery. As a result, Yatir's management is left to pursue its objective of quality and individuality without interference from "Big Brother."

While the marketing, sales, distribution, and export of Yatir and Darom wines are controlled by Carmel, I can attest to Yatir Winery's otherwise independence. I joined Carmel in 2002, and on my first day (I even remember the date – December 12) I visited what was then the Ramat Arad Winery. After that, I was an integral part of meetings that decided on the new name, logo, and launch.

When Yatir Winery scored 93 points in the first-ever tasting of Israeli wines by Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate*, it was, at the time, the highest score ever received by any Israeli, kosher, or Eastern Mediterranean winery. I found out on a Friday night in December 2007 and had to wait until after Shabbat before being able to give Ben-Dor the great news.

In other words, Carmel was very involved, but not in the wine growing or winemaking. Carmel helped at times to find use for declassified grapes deemed not good enough for Yatir. Carmel's very respectable investment in

equipment at Yatir enabled it to remain at the cutting edge of technology. Yatir Winery spearheads Carmel's fine wine offering, along with its own Carmel Signature wines and the wines of Vitkin Winery, which it distributes in Israel.

My favorite wines from Yatir are the refreshing, crisp Darom by Yatir White; the delicately fresh Yatir Mount Amasa Rosé; the complex Mount Amasa Red; and the outstanding Yatir Petit Verdot, one of the finest varietals of this variety you will find. Best of all is the velvety Yatir Forest, one of the leading prestige wines in the country.

However, the wine that shows how Yatir is keeping up with the times is a new expression, recently launched, called in Hebrew *B'tzel Ha'alva*. This translates as "In the shade of the foliage." It follows experimental wines made under the name Barrel No. 80.

The new expression is from the 2020 vintage and is made from Grenache 49%, Cinsault 26%, Syrah 13%, and Carignan 12%. These are grown in the traditional goblet-bush vine style. The wine was made with the use of large foudres (very large wooden vats) and open-top cement tanks. It is medium-bodied, with a mainly red fruit aroma in a lighter, vibrant style, with good acidity. It is a great lunchtime wine and is ideal with Israel's Levantine cuisine. It brings Mediterranean varieties to what I call the Negev forest, to explain the uniqueness of the region. It represents a nice departure and a new beginning.

As Yatir Winery approaches its first quarter of a century, it is wonderful to see how it is keeping up with the times, leading in making changes, while maintaining quality and making wines that reflect its distinctive terroir.

It has grown in a smart way, managing to evolve and succeeding in reinventing itself. It seems the lion is still roaring and drawing the attention of connoisseurs, wine professionals, and wine lovers alike. ■

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



YATIR WINERY is very up to date: The winemaker has all the options – including large barrels, cement tanks, open-top fermenters, and amphorae of different sizes.

THIS ANCIENT wine press within the forest illustrates that wine was made in the same place 2,000 years ago.