

SHAVUOT BETA Riesling.
(Barkan Winery)

SEEING RED, DRINKING WHITE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Israelis, Jews, and the kosher drinking community worldwide are wedded to red wines. It is in their genes. Red is the default choice without thought. It is not for nothing that the two biggest brands in Israeli wine are not Carmel and Barkan, or Yarden and Castel, but Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. The bias goes back to the very beginning.

The roots of winemaking began with reds – that was what there was. The Bible is full of references to blood red wine and, sure enough, red wine became the wine of choice for the great religions of Judeo-Christianity, and wine gradually became a symbol of Western culture.

Wine for *Kiddush*, *havdalah*, or the four cups at Passover was invariably red, and the habit became a preferred recommendation. What was good for the Jews was also adopted by the Christians for their sacramental wines. Altar and communion wine was invariably red, too. Religious ritual chose red.

Fast forward to the early 1990s, and people actually drank more whites than reds. Emerald Riesling was the biggest seller. Then in 1992, the idea known as the French Paradox was aired on the influential *Sixty Minutes* television newsmagazine program. They came to the conclusion that red wines were healthier than whites. Overnight, consumers switched to red. Just like that.

At roughly the same time, wineries

unlocked the key to making reds like whites: light, fruity, not astringent, flavorful, and refreshing. The Golan Heights Winery's Mount Hermon Red was the example that led the way. Wineries were forced to graft red varieties onto white root stocks to cope with the demand.

The “only reds” brigade came to the fore as Israeli wines were becoming quite good and consumers were starting to understand something about wine. There came to be an understanding that only red wines could be of great quality. If you wanted to give a gift, or if your boss came to dinner, the only realistic option was to purchase one red wine or another. If you were a collector, especially one of those who love showing off their cellar, you would certainly

only buy reds. Wine for experts meant red.

I REMEMBER I was once at one of the finest wineries in Greece, being given a tasting in their visitors' center. Now you can't visit anywhere in the world without hearing Hebrew. When you hear it, your ears prick up because it is familiar – it sounds like home. On the other hand, your shoulders drop as you wonder if there is anywhere on the planet you can visit without bumping into Israelis.

I was sitting at the bar (I as an interested customer, not as a wine critic) and was beginning a tasting menu which started with white wines. Now, Greece makes very good whites. They may even be better than their reds.



(FROM L) Barkan W; Jezreel Valley Sauvignon Blanc; Rimapere Sauvignon Blanc; Teperberg Chardonnay; Carmel Single Vineyard Riesling; Recanati Special Reserve; Seror L'Or Blanc; Porta 6 Vinho Verde. (Photos: Wineries mentioned; Carmel: Eyal Keren; Recanati: Guy Hecht)

There was a fellow countryman at the bar. When he was offered the flight of wines I was enjoying, I heard him blurt out with great confidence: "No thank you. I only drink reds!"

I cringed, put my head down, shriveled in my seat, and determined that I would only speak English from then on. Obviously he could taste what he wants, but what a missed opportunity!

This attitude was quite widespread. Nothing would infuriate me more than the wine snob who would proudly pontificate "I only drink reds." It spread like a disease and became the *de rigueur* statement of so-called experts. They would say it proudly, chest puffed out like a peacock, with the implication: "I only drink reds... because I understand wine, and maybe you don't." The wine world is full of people who use their knowledge like a blunt weapon. I wish I had a shekel for every time I heard it.

However, wine trends constantly change. What goes around, comes around. And you know what? White wines are coming back. In the last 10 to 15 years, there has been a big improvement in the quality and variety of white wines. The consumer is waking up to a world of white. This is most apparent in restaurants, where wine trends begin.

WHAT THE curious wine drinker has realized is that white wines offer more variety than red wines. They are far better for our climate. Who wants to drink a big, high-alcohol red on a hot humid summer's day, when you can drink a lower-alcohol, refreshing white? Also, white wines accompany our Israeli Levantine cuisine far better than reds.

Making white wines is much more fraught than making red – it is the main test of the winemaker's art. To gain that magic balance of fruit, freshness, and acidity needs precision viticulture. The choice of container used for fermentation and the use of skin contact or lees are key decisions that influence the final style. There is not much leeway for mistakes. From the time the grapes arrive at the winery, there has to be absolute control to ensure the wine does not fall off the winemaking tightrope and lose its aromas and freshness.

Now we even have our own white

wine festival: It is called Shavuot, when dairy products are eaten. This is only a step away from wine and cheese, which is a partnership that has a familiarity like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, Lennon and McCartney, or Bibi and Sara – but the assumption is that it automatically means red wine. However, the stereotype is wrong. White wines go far better with most cheeses than reds.

Organizing a wine and cheese party is easy. You need, say, five different cheeses, and three different wines. Cut up some vegetables and decorate a cheese platter with a few nuts and grapes on a cheese board, and you are set. Get your guests to contribute a wine or a cheese. This year, try to support businesses from the northwestern Negev and the Galilee. For instance, I have already purchased the excellent artisan cheeses produced by Kibbutz Be'eri and will personally make a point of drinking wines from the Upper Galilee.

Here are some general recommendations from across the board.

WINE DRINKERS – UP TO NIS 49

Golan Heights, Hermon, Mount Hermon White 2023. This is always under the radar, but if you are looking for a crisp, fragrant white for under NIS 50, it will never let you down. Produced under the Hermon label, Mount Hermon White is made from a broad selection of white varieties grown on the high elevation volcanic plateau of the Golan Heights.

Zion, Imperial Sauvignon Blanc 2023. This is really an excellent value. It is aromatic with good varietal typicity. Zion Winery was founded in 1848 and is our oldest existing winery. It is the fifth-largest one in Israel but is still a family winery. Even the winemaker is still in the family, a job that has been passed down for over 176 years.

WINE EXPERTS NIS 50-99

Porta 6 Vinho Verde 2023. Porta 6 has become a popular, colorful brand in Israel. Made in Portugal, they now produce kosher cuvees. This is a Vinho Verde from the Minho region in the North. It is a super wine style for our climate. Comparatively low alcohol, refreshing, easy to like, with a light sweetness.

Barkan W Chardonnay 2022. This is an Upper Galilee Chardonnay that Barkan hopes to sell alongside its Platinum Red. It is not clear what the W stands for: Either it refers to the fact that it is a white wine or to its predominantly white label. The wine itself is good, creamy, but with balancing acidity. Barkan, founded in 1990, is our second-largest winery. It is situated in Hulda, alongside Israel's largest vineyard.

Jezreel Valley Sauvignon Blanc 2023. I have always tended to think of Jezreel Valley as a red wine winery. However, I came across their Sauvignon Blanc, and it is a lovely wine. Aromatic, refreshing, with good acidity. Still, the winery is mainly known for its Argaman and Carignan, but this is worth looking out for.

Teperberg Essence Chardonnay 2022. A classic traditional Chardonnay with tropical fruit, a buttery character, and a round mouth feel in a fresh style. It has a nicely balanced finish. Teperberg Winery was founded in 1870 and remains our largest family-owned winery. Managed by the fifth generation, it is situated in Tzora.

CONNOISSEURS NIS 100-149

Carmel Tel Avital Riesling 2022. This is a new expression of a single vineyard Riesling for Carmel. It comes from the northern Golan, our coolest wine region. The wine is elegant, racy, with some of those classic Riesling white flower aromas, and a touch of citrus. It is a replacement for the legendary Kayoumi Riesling, which was a unicorn wine with aging ability. Let's see where the Tel Avital Riesling goes with a little more bottle age; so far, it promises well. Carmel is the historic winery of Israel. It still makes wine at Zichron Ya'acov Cellars, established in 1892, the oldest winery or factory building still in use.

Rimapere Sauvignon Blanc 2022. This is a new edition to the kosher ranks. A high-quality, authentic Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand. Rimapere is owned and produced by Edmond de Rothschild Heritage. They make wines in France, Argentina, Spain, and South Africa. This branch of the Rothschild family has always produced kosher runs and supported the Jewish wine drinker. This is the latest example.

Those who love Kiwi Sauvignon Blancs will enjoy this – and it comes in a screw cap, which is a plus in my book!

Seror L'Or Blanc 2022. Domaine Seror is a French-owned, quality small winery from the southern Golan Heights. This wine is a blend of Chenin Blanc from the southern Golan, and Viognier and Roussanne, both from the northern Golan. The latter two were barrel fermented, and the Chenin was fermented in stainless steel. This is a broad flavored, fleshy wine with good complexity and a long, well-balanced finish.

Feldstein Sauvignon Blanc 2022. This is a masterful Sauvignon Blanc. The aroma is not the thing here, but the mouth feel, the texture, and the mineral character. Avi Feldstein, ex Segal Wines, now owns his own winery in Ramat Dalton in the Upper Galilee. The label is framed by the coordinates of a map. Feldstein Winery is dedicated to finding an Israeli character and a sense of place in the wines it produces.

FEINSCHMECKERS NIS 150+

Recanati Special Reserve White 2021. This is the flagship white wine from Recanati Winery, which is situated in the Upper Galilee. It is a blend of Marsanne and Roussanne, two partners often blended together in Southern France's Rhône Valley. Here it fulfills Recanati's objective of giving a push where possible to Mediterranean varieties. This is a full-bodied wine, with complexity and length. The Marsanne is fatter, while the Roussanne provides the spice and acidity. It's always nice to taste alternatives to Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, and this a beautiful wine. It may even benefit from decanting.

This Shavuot may be a good time to appreciate the quality and variety of white wines available in Israel today. Get on the bandwagon – the pendulum is swinging. Allow yourself to wallow in white. ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran and insider turned wine writer. The wine writer for The Jerusalem Post, he has advanced Israeli wine for 38 years and is known as the 'English voice of Israeli wine.' www.adammontefiore.com