

# EXPLORING BIBLICAL ISRAEL

• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**T**he Central Mountains is the mountain range that runs down the spine of Israel. Most describe this region as the West Bank or Judea and Samaria. These are politically charged names which, when used, will instantly reveal your political persuasion.

“Central Mountains” is a description that explains the topography, which is wholly appropriate for a wine region. Its subregions include the Samaritan Hills and the Judean Hills. The region runs south from Mount Gilboa to Yatir Forest, both of which are in the “State of Israel” rather than “Eretz Israel” – as is the part of the Judean Hills that is a registered appellation. That only applies to what is known as the Jerusalem corridor. Complicated, but if a country of 77 years still has no final borders, do not expect the wine regions to be any more organized.

The Central Mountains is the region of biblical Israel, the basis of Jewish tradition with breathtakingly beautiful views and sparse, stony mountain ranges. Elevations are high, up to 900 meters above sea level. Soils are shallow and poor, on a bedrock of limestone. Sometimes growers have had to drill holes into the stony soil to plant vines.

There is none of the humidity that there is on the coast, and there are big differences between day and nighttime temperatures; it is ideal wine-growing terroir. Wineries have planted vineyards here, their owners really believing with all their being that they are personally fulfilling the prophecies of the prophets that “They will rebuild and inhabit the ruined cities. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine” (*Amos 9:14*).

In biblical times, every community grew vines. Grapes were one of the blessed species. Wine was important to the economy and essential for the religious ritual. Vineyards were planted on terraced slopes and in the valleys. There were wine presses, flat limestone basins, close to the vineyards where the wine was made. Then the wine was stored in amphorae in cool caves before it was consumed, exported, or used for paying tribute.

However, despite such a long history of grape growing, vineyards were planted relatively late in the modern era. In fact, it was not until the turn of the millennium that the average wine lover became aware of wine from this region.



THE FIRST sign of the potential of the Central Mountains terroir in our times only came in 2002. Carmel Winery produced a single vineyard Merlot from a Har Bracha vineyard, high up in the Samaritan Mountains, at 800 meters elevation. It was one of the best Merlots in the country and a massive vote of confidence in the pioneers who planted the vineyard. This success spawned a whole new planting rush in the Central Mountains region.

It was also convenient from an image point of view. The picture of settlers growing grapes and making wine was certainly more positive than the often-televised image of bearded immigrants with American accents being seen to lord over the land with Kalashnikovs in hand. Now the wine region supports a varied wine route. There are a number of wineries ranging from tiny domestic to medium-sized commercial ones.

This region particularly appeals to religious Jews, who see it as the land of their forefathers. It is therefore not a surprise that the most regular visitors to the area are religious Jews and evangelistic Christians, some of whom return annually to work in the harvest.

The region boasts Jerusalem at its center. Today, only one Israeli winery has its fingertips in the Israeli capital: Jerusalem Vineyard Winery, situated in Atarot on the northern outskirts of the city. However, the visitors' center of Jerusalem VW could not be more central or accessible. It is situated at the Montefiore

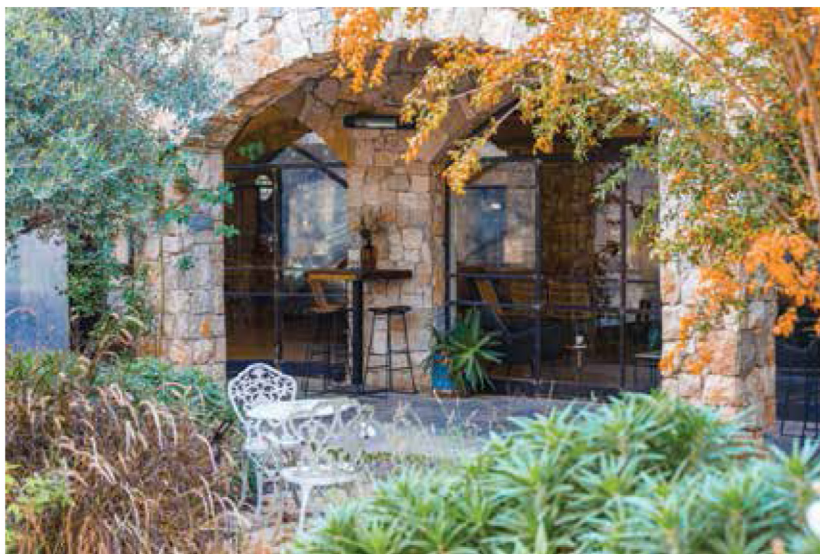
Windmill in the Mishkenot Sha'ananim-Yemin Moshe neighborhood, in the heart of Jerusalem. Its Premium Rosé and Sauvignon Blanc (SLB) are superb and a great value. It also has a very good single vineyard Petit Verdot. It is an experience to taste these wines overlooking the Old City walls of Jerusalem. The winery's CEO and winemaker is Lior Lacser, former head winemaker at Carmel, who has proved himself both there and here to be very talented.

North of Jerusalem is the Psagot Winery, which was founded in 2004. This is the largest of the Central Mountain wineries. It is a powerhouse, with excellent sales particularly in the United States. It is also one of the most beautiful wineries in Israel. Psagot has a very respectable, traditional-method sparkling wine. I like the PR Rosé, and my favorite is the Peak: a big chewy, complex Mediterranean blend. Psagot will be the next million bottle winery.

Owner Ya'acov Berg is a force of nature, a human dynamo with immense drive and success in pushing for sales. His wife, Na'ama, has put the soul into a beautiful winery that sometimes seems to market itself more as an events venue than a winery. But they do have a very good winemaker: Canadian-born Sam Soroka has made wine in five countries and is one of the most experienced winemakers in Israel.

SHILOH IS a place steeped in religious and biblical significance. It was where the Ark of the Covenant was stored for a while. The archaeological site of ancient Shiloh is situated near the modern Shiloh. One shows evidence of ancient winemaking, the other houses a modern winery. The Shiloh Winery was founded in 2005. It is blessed with beautiful new premises, and Shiloh's wines are much loved by judges in competitions, not just in Israel but also internationally. The Secret Cabernet Sauvignon has won the Israel Wine Awards (Eshkol Hazahav) first place gold medal no less than seven times. This is Israel's leading competition.

Shiloh Winery's prestige Mosaic and Petit Verdot are excellent, and I also really like the relaunched Legend range, offering three wines in different styles. Winemaker Amichai Lourie is irreplaceable and personally involved in every aspect of running the winery. His active presence, particularly in the United States and on social media, is a lesson to all wineries that



SHIVI DRORI, winemaker of Gva'ot Winery and professor researching indigenous varieties at Ariel University. (Photos: Wineries mentioned)

PSAGOT: THE region's largest winery and a hot spot for events.



want to build image and sell more. I often say to wineries, “If you want to do more, learn from the non-stop activities of Amichai Lourie.”

Gva’ot Winery was founded in 2005. This is a small boutique winery situated on a hill overlooking the Shiloh riverbed. It is interesting to taste the Gva’ot Bittuni and the Hamdani Jandali blend. Gva’ot’s Gofna Cabernet Franc is very good. Gva’ot just may have the best Pinot Noir in the country, and its top Cabs are outstanding.

I believe this is the finest winery in the Central Mountains. The winery is smaller than some of the others and is run with style and an emphasis on quality in the bottle. Winemaker Shivi Drori is also Prof. Elyashiv Drori of Ariel University, who is investigating and researching the indigenous grape varieties of the Holy Land. Israeli wine owes a debt of gratitude for his painstaking work in saving and reviving varieties, which in the future will be available for Israeli winemakers to play with.

TURA WINERY always seems to be in the news. On a recent Israel Independence Day, the owner was honored by lighting a torch, which in truth was more an honor for the settlement project in Samaria than for the Israeli wine industry as a whole. Politics aside, I still believe Israeli wine should receive the recognition due to it. (Are Israel Prize judges listening?)

As for Tura’s wines, the top of the range Mountain Peak is always good. I always like the Merlot; and the rare Limited Edition, made from Dolcetto and Marselan, is a very refreshing summer red. Erez Ben Saadon is a grower and winemaker, someone who is happier when the vines and wines are around him. His wife, Vered, is a pusher who never stops talking up her wines – try and stop her at your peril! They complement each other perfectly.

Har Bracha Winery, founded in 2007, is the farthest



A VINEYARD in Har Bracha, high up in the Samaritan Mountains.

north in the Samaritan mountains on Mount Grizim. Its wines are always good, and the Highlander label can be excellent. The owners are a fine team.

South of Jerusalem is the Gush Etzion Winery. This was the first modern-day Central Mountains winery. It is a good place to visit, partly because of its restaurant, but the wines are also good. I particularly like the Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, and the dry Gewurztraminer makes a nice change here.

Drimia is a small boutique winery at Sussiya, not far from Yatir. Its Cabernet Sauvignon and blend are both really good quality and always underrated.

For many, the region is the beating heart of the Holy Land. However, it is also the place where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict comes to a head. Twenty years ago, there were wines from the “occupied” or “disputed” territories, but they were not talked about in general wine circles. Carmel produced only one vintage of that Har Bracha Merlot because the owners got cold feet about producing wine from the territories. Daniel Rogov, the legendary wine critic of *The Jerusalem Post* and *Haaretz*, covered wines from the territories, but in his own personal protest, he never visited wineries over the Green Line. In those days, wine in the Central Mountains was a tiny, insignificant part of the Israeli wine industry.

THESE DAYS, the Central Mountains wines are certainly more accepted in Israel, and Israeli wineries are no longer coy about being seen to use fruit from vineyards in the region. Internationally, publications like *Wine Spectator* (USA) and *Decanter* (UK) comfortably feature these wines without judgment about place of origin, though the *World Atlas of Wine* does show the Green Line in its wine map of Israel. If

there is a clear rejection, it comes from closer to home, from Tel Aviv, the wine culture capital of Israel.

Many hotels, restaurants, or sommeliers make a point of not choosing wines from over the Green Line. However, this loss of sales is more than made up by the support of those on the political Right, who will actively go out of their way to be supportive. I don’t believe in boycotts, but I do believe it is the right of each buyer to purchase the wines that he or she wants without recrimination – that is the way of the world. As for the wineries, you win some and you lose some, but boycotts by the likes of the BDS movement and the loony Left have no effect on sales whatsoever.

The proof of the pudding, though, is in the drinking. The wines of the region win more than their fair share of awards in both Israeli and international competitions, which proves the quality of the Central Mountains’ terroir. The Decanter World Wine Awards is arguably the largest and most prestigious international wine competition. Over a seven-year period of the Decanter WWA, 18 gold medals have been awarded to Israeli wines. Of these, 10 have come from the Central Mountains region. That is more than 55%!

It is amazing how the wineries and vineyards of the region have become part of the narrative, when only 10 years ago they were regarded as a reality one would not talk about too much. The winemakers have passion and individuality, and the wines are good – that is the bottom line. ■

*The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for over four decades. He is referred to as the ‘English voice of Israeli wine.’ [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*



Clockwise from top:

SHILOH HAS opened a beautiful new winery – a must-visit for tourists.

TURA WINERY owners, Vered and Erez Ben Saadon, overlooking their vineyards.

AMICHAH LOURIE, winemaker of Shiloh Winery, fulfilling the prophets’ vision of planting vineyards.