

TUSCAN DREAMLAND

Adam Montefiore

At the KFWE in Tel Aviv, I arrived early. My policy is to turn up at opening time, see who I want to see, taste what I want to taste and leave early. That is before the crowds arrive, thrusting their glasses at the pourers saying "give me your best red!" This is the big kosher food and wine exhibition that takes place annually in New York, Miami, Los Angeles, London and Tel Aviv. It is organized by Royal Wine like a roadshow. Represented are some of the best kosher wines from everywhere. It is an opportunity to touch base with existing and new wines, because the portfolio is always growing. The Tel Aviv KFWE is organized by Zur Agencies. They are the leading kosher specialists of imported wines here and Royal's arm in Israel.

If one arrives early, most of the stands are not ready and there is nothing worse for a winery to have a visitor who demands attention before the stand is prepared. It is kind of annoying. I know, because I have been on both sides of this equation. Also frustrating is for the visitor is to arrive at a stand manned by a religious pourer who has been instructed how to pour five minutes beforehand. The risk is that you get poured too little or too much, and the wine is too cold or too warm. That is before you ask a question. Kosher expedience is more critical than customer service. So you are unlikely to receive the product information you are seeking.

However, this time, the first stand in the hall was Cantina Giuliano, and standing there like a soldier, with a warm welcome and ready smile, with bottles at the correct temperature, already open and ready for visitors, was owner Eli Gauthier. We met and started talking before the penny dropped and we realized we knew each other. I had written about him ten years ago when his business was a hopeful and brave start up.

Gauthier is much travelled. He is French but was living and studying in London for three years. There he met the love of his life and fell by chance into a new career in wine. It started not with a love of wine, but with a need to earn a few shekels. He started pouring wine at Kosher Kingdom on behalf of Kedem Europe, the main kosher wine importer and distributor in Great Britain. He, a Frenchman from Paris, met Lara, an Italian from Tuscany, at London University. They married in Israel and initially lived in London. On the chance of circumstance, he found a new path and two new passions.

Wine caught his interest and he took an online winemaking course whilst on the job training at a winery in Alsace. It was a biodynamic winery and from there, Gauthier realized he wanted to make artisan, handcrafted wine with soul and a sense of place, rather than commercial wine in large quantities.

It just so happened, that Lara's parents had a property in Tuscany in the beautiful village of Casciona Alta. Apart from the ginormous Bartenura from Asti in Piedmont, both Italy and Tuscany in particular were a kosher wine desert. Kosher wine was focused in the Galilee and Judea in Israel, in Bordeaux and in California. There was a kosher winery in Tuscany, which is the

admirable Terra di Seta, which makes excellent quality local wines with good typicity. However, the young couple saw an opportunity. The idea was not to build an empire or to rigidly follow expansive business plans, but to have fun and indulge in what he wanted to do. At this stage, it was simply to make wine. In 2014 in the garage of the property of Lara's parents, he made his first wine. It began life as a genuine 'garagiste' winery.

They are not far from Livorno, a great center of Jewish life in the past. My distinguished forebear Sir Moses Montefiore was born there. His family made the opposite journey to Gauthier. They settled in London and Montefiore was a great connoisseur of wine, drinking a bottle of wine every day of his long life. He lived in circles of wine appreciation. His nephew had purchased Chateau Mouton Rothschild. But that was a long time ago. Livorno has deep Jewish roots, but today it is only a small Jewish community and a mere reminder of the great days of old.

Eli and Lara's first wine was a Chianti (what else) called Primize, a word which refers to the first fruits. They called the winery Cantina Giuliano, named after Lara's grandfather. And they ended up making wine in the same place where Giuliano had made wine and olive oil. The label was a lovely old black and white photo of Lara's father, Giustino, carrying a large demi-john of wine. They had a wine and a story.

The Gauthiers are a much travelled couple. Eli had lived in Paris, where he grew up, but also in England, California and Jerusalem. Lara had been in Florence, Istanbul, London and Jerusalem. However Jewish life in Tuscany was rather sparse, so the family chose to live in Strasbourg in France, where there was a Jewish community and travelled seasonally to Tuscany to make wine.

Another passion of the young wine couple was food. A few years after their first wine, they opened a farmhouse dairy restaurant. Of course, everything was local and homemade. They used Tuscan vegetables and fruits from their own orchards and made their own pasta, cheese and olive oil. Their food became a passion, no less than the wine. For them both, the process and journey was as important as the final result. The winery became known for its food.

Kosher wine tourism was picking up and it made sense that those that visited wanting to enjoy Tuscany and a taste of kosher wine, would also have kosher food to eat. Their food became a representation of the Tuscan countryside on a plate. Homemade food, artisan wine and natural, beautiful surroundings, is a tourism paradise. They were able to provide a kosher dolce vita for those eager to visit the Tuscan countryside. It became a must visit destination for kosher feinschmeckers visiting Tuscany.

In that first year they made 12,000 bottles. They started off in a building with no electricity and with only a primitive camping stove to cook with. Now twelve years later, they are making 120,000 bottles a year. The part time restaurant developed into a proper restaurant and the growing demand for kosher food allowed Eli and Lara to develop a fully-fledged catering business. They now supply food all over, for events, simchas and for use in private holiday homes.

He grew the wine business steadily through word of mouth and online activity. There was no big company marketing programs or sophisticated promotions, but the wines were reasonably priced and have become well-known and appreciated for their authenticity, quality and value. However selling 100,000 bottles is a different prospect from 10,000, which is why he is now distributed by Royal Wine and Zur, in Israel.

Never mind the business. Making wine for him is an emotional, cerebral and religious affair. He loves the feeling of nature and agriculture, and of combining these in his job with his religion. If someone is enjoying his food and wine, in the context of the Tuscan countryside, whilst appreciating the kosher Jewish aspect that runs through all his motivations, then he could not be happier. It is not just the making and doing, but doing it the right way that gives him a kick. Seeing the client and customer appreciation, and knowing that his wines are used for Shabbat meals and for making Kiddush, gives him great satisfaction.

I tasted the wines recently. Cantina Giuliano has a reasonably new white wine made from Vermentino. It is a variety well used in Sardinia, but is also planted widely in Tuscany. It has saline notes and a tight minerality. The bottle I tasted had more texture than aromatics. His rose is called Rosato. It is made from Sangiovese, the grape of Tuscany. It is nicely colored exhibiting good fruit, a fresh fruit led flavor and refreshing acidity, We finished this bottle quickly without much thought. It was the perfect summer wine.

The Chianti Primize is the base wine. It is made mainly from Sangiovese balanced with the international variety Merlot and local variety Cilieggiolo. The Merlot provides flesh and roundness, the Cilieggiolo gives color. The wine is fruit forward, fresh with good drinkability. It was enjoyable, not too serious, but fun to drink.

We also tasted his Cabernet Sauvignon from Maremma, the south west coast of Tuscany and the Super Tuscan, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Syrah, with a little Merlot. These are both serious full flavored wines, needing time in the glass. The wines need to be appreciated over a meal for the aromas and flavors to come to the fore.

Top priced is the flagship A Mano, which means 'handmade.' It is a handcrafted wine made from Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, grown in 30 year old vineyards from the Maremma region. It is full bodied, rich, complex and opulent.

My favorite wines were the Rosato and Primize, but there was another wine that was very popular. That was the new "V", which is made from Vermentino. It was light, aromatic but full flavored, fruity, frizzante and sweet. This is a wine to drink ice cold any time any place, from breakfast, for a brunch, as an aperitif or with fruit based desserts.

One of the strange anomalies is that the number of kosher wineries there are in Europe, you can count on one hand. It is surprising because there are no lack of Orthodox Jews around and it is fact that more and more kosher wines are now being made, including these days in Italy too. Yet

Cantina Giuliano is one of only five kosher wineries in the whole of Europe. All the other kosher wine being made are kosher batches made in non kosher wineries.

For Eli Gauthier, Cantina Giuliano is a meeting point of family, Judaism, wine, food and tourism in a corner of one of the most beautiful wine regions of the world. Everything is personal, rustic and rural and he does everything with a personal touch, with character and great individuality. So when I approached his winery's table at KFWF, it was totally appropriate that he would be there in person, to share the experience of making the wines for the curious taster. The person, the wine, and the making of them, is what you get in the glass.

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

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