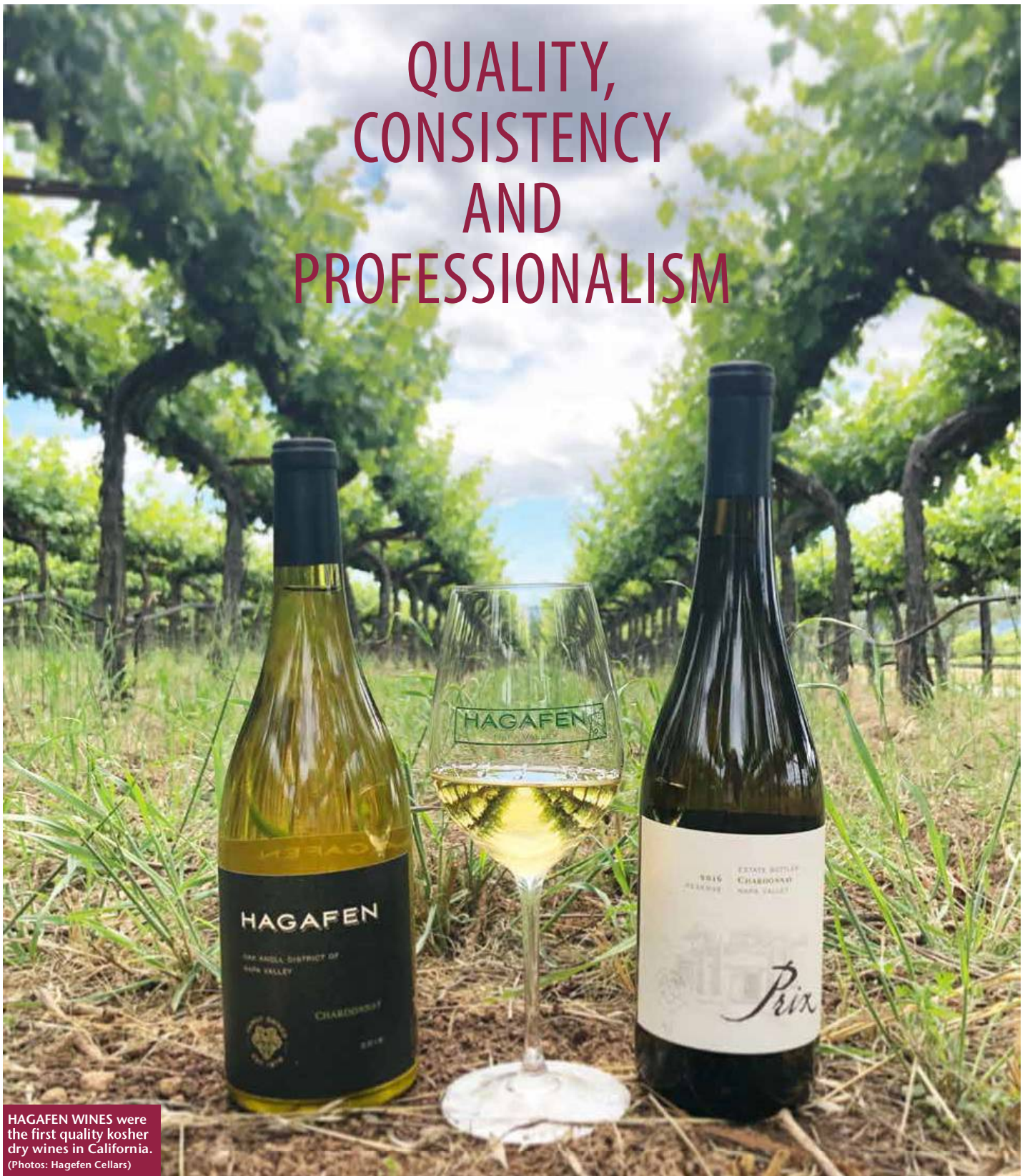


# QUALITY, CONSISTENCY AND PROFESSIONALISM



HAGAFEN WINES were the first quality kosher dry wines in California. (Photos: Hagefen Cellars)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**T**his year Hagafen Cellars celebrates its 40th anniversary. Hard to believe how time flies. To me it only seems like yesterday that we were first talking about Hagafen wines! This is a winery that has become a permanent fixture on the kosher wine scene, a matter of pride and interest for wine lovers, and yet is also part of the regular scenery of Napa Valley, the most famous wine route in the world. We have become so used to Hagafen's prime position, that we almost take it for granted. The reason why people are not dancing on the streets or banging on the tables, is that the owner is a quiet, honorable type, a doer rather than a talker. He grows fruit and turns it into wine, and does not shout about how good he is. There is none of the "I...I..." prevalent from some winemakers, which always puts me off. He lets the wine do the talking. I like that in a winemaker.

Unfortunately, the kosher wine trade is often dominated by gimmicks. There is a constant appetite for what's new which takes all the attention and he who shouts loudest and latest, is often the one the bored wine buyer will notice. Consistency, professionalism and quality over a long period is something that garners respect in the wider wine trade. However, in our niche kosher and Israeli world, the mainstays can be forgotten in the rush to worship the new golden calf.

Fortunately, some do remember and give credit to the winery. Founder Ernie Weir was recently honored as one of the Top 100 Game Changers in the last 100 years in *Wine and Vine Magazine*! He took his place alongside the giants of the wine trade as the person who brought quality California wine to the kosher category. He was the first to give the kosher consumer an opportunity to enjoy award-winning wines. This pioneer influenced his peers and the kosher wine sector was changed forever. This amazing recognition was well-deserved and a reminder to all of us that Hagafen was the first in the new wave of quality and recognized Ernie Weir's contribution to the kosher wine revolution.

He told me that in his house, his parents, immigrants from Germany and Czechoslovakia, drank white wine and it was always his responsibility at home to make kiddush and the blessing over wine. After the Six Day War, there was a great surge of pride in Israel, and a new awareness and appreciation of one's Jewish roots. In the 1960s, Weir had also observed the beginnings of the Mondavi effect on Californian wine. Robert Mondavi led the change in how wine was made and marketed, and drinking habits also began to change from sweet to dry. At the same time, there was a "back to the land" movement in California, and a period in an Israeli kibbutz had strengthened his urge to work the land. Weir then studied at UC Davis and joined Domaine Chandon, the Californian arm of Moët et Chandon. He worked there from 1973 to 1997.

He was always a farmer at heart and looked after the vineyards. The idea of founding a winery came about because this was his hobby, expertise and profession. He decided to make the wine kosher because of his immense cultural respect for his religion and pride in the Jewish people. He noticed how second-generation Italians were making wine using Italian names (like Mondavi) and thought his Jewish pride was no less than theirs. He remembers there was a Jewish magazine of the time with an unlikely wine review. This encouraged him to believe there would be demand and economic potential.

At the time, Manischewitz was king and sweet wines ruled. Hagafen was the first winery to produce quality, dry table wines that also happened to be kosher. It was



HAGAFEN WINERY is in the famous Californian region of Napa Valley.

the first blast in a kosher revolution that was to follow. Hagafen was founded in 1979. The Golan Heights Winery followed in 1983, then Herzog Wine Cellars in 1985 and the first French Rothschild kosher wine was produced in 1986. The previous decade had finished with Manischewitz, Kedem, Mogen Dovid and Palwin, the '80s ended with Hagafen, Yarden, Herzog & Rothschild. Gan Eden and Weinstock were to follow. The kosher wine revolution was well underway... and Hagafen was the first.

The main difference in quality, according to Weir, could be boiled down simply to the use of corks and barrels. Corks replaced the inefficient screw caps they had then and wines were aged in small oak barrels for the first time. New World technology, including temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks, was introduced, and winemakers took over the decision-making process in the vineyards. Previously, a winemaker would never set foot in a vineyard. He would meet the grower only at the harvest. In the new wave, winemakers started to make wine in the vineyard. Furthermore, all decisions, including how to prune and when to harvest, passed from grower to winemaker.

I DON'T want to do an injustice to Carmel. It is true they were the first to market varietals, age in small barrels and bottle with corks. Winemaker Freddie Stiller confided in me he had no budget for barrels, but he did have permission to buy them for brandy. So, he diverted a few of these barrels for use in his iconic Carmel Special Reserve 1976. Carmel in the 1970s led the kosher world, but the overall quality was scarcely international standard. The quality revolution in Israel really had to wait for the founding of the Golan Heights Winery.

Hagafen Cellars is a small California winery located in Napa Valley. They produce 100,000 bottles a year from organically grown estate vineyards in Coombsville and Napa. Their wines have won numerous awards at the highest level over the past 40 years. The wines have been the personal choice of successive presidents of the United States of America, being used in official White House banquets on over 20 occasions, from Reagan onward.

Weir makes Californian Napa wine, without kosher on his sleeve. Most of his customers are regular wine lovers and visitors to the winery are tourists. However, at the same time, he wants to make wine that Jews anywhere can drink.

Therefore Hagafen wines are both kosher and *mevushal*, which means flash pasteurized. This is a boon to the kosher catering and restaurant industry, because it means the wines remain kosher even if someone



OWNER-WINEMAKER Ernie Weir is happiest as a grower.

non-Jewish opens the bottle. Weir does not believe the pasteurization process is harmful, on the contrary, in some instances it can help the flavor profile. His techniques mitigate the negative effects. No doubt the wines continue to win awards and tastings of older vintages show the reds age very well. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

There are three labels. The prestige Prix label is more for connoisseurs, the Hagafen label is the one that carries the flag and there is also the entry-level Don Ernesto. The Hagafen Sauvignon Blanc 2017 is amazing. You would be certain you are drinking a wine from New Zealand. It is highly aromatic, bursting with tropical fruit aromas, and gives a really flavorful, fruity mouth feel. This is balanced and contrasted by a piercing acidity that makes the wine so refreshing. The Hagafen Cabernet Franc 2017 is a mouthful of wine. It has a bold blackberry, cherry aroma, an excellent tannic structure and well-balanced finish. A big wine on flavor, but only 13.5% alcohol. Both wines have the pronounced fruit-forward character that Weir strives for, with an underlying freshness which makes these such good food wines.

THE WINERY is on the prestigious Silverado Trail. Wine lovers and connoisseurs love to visit the Tuscan-like farm tasting room and gardens. There, they have an opportunity to taste and buy from a broad range of current releases or a selection of library wines. The wines of Hagafen Cellars are fine expressions of their terroir, made with care for the surrounding environment and respect for religion. The vineyards are sustainably farmed and certified organic, the winery is solar-powered and certified Napa Green and the wines are suitable for vegans. Weir's wife, Israel-born, Irit, is a full partner. He refers to her as Triple A – acupuncturist, artist and activist! Her influence may be seen and felt at the visitors' center.

Weir sees himself primarily as a wine grower. There, he is at his happiest as a farmer, among his vines. "I am a simply trying to make the finest quality wine I could from the excellent fruit at my disposal." He said his initial objective was trying to make kosher wine part of the regular food and wine scene. I think he succeeded.

peers and the kosher wine sector was changed forever. The quality, integrity and authenticity of Hagafen wines over the last 40 years should be celebrated by all wine lovers and connoisseurs. ■

*The writer has advanced Israeli wines for over 30 years and is regarded as the English voice of Israeli wine. [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com).*