



PURIM CELEBRATES the grape in a nod to the Persian wine parties. (Carmel Winery)

IT IS a time for less expensive, good-value wines. (Carmel Winery)

## BE HAPPY, DRINK HEARTY



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Purim is really the only time that Jews are encouraged to get drunk, and it is all in the name of religion. You need to become so drunk that you can't tell the difference between the words "Blessed be Mordecai" and "Cursed be Haman."

Drunkenness is not well regarded in Judaism. Noah tarnished an unblemished reputation by becoming drunk from the wine he produced. The story of Lot and his daughters is another biblical story where over-indulgence is an issue.

Jews throughout history have been regarded as an abstemious people, who don't drink. If you attend a Scottish wedding, the guests will all be congregated at the bar. At a Jewish wedding, the bar is empty because it is the buffet that is the attraction. I suppose whereas the Greeks regarded wine and overindulgence as a divine state, even creating a wine god named Dionysus (Bacchus to the Romans), wine in Judaism was always measured by caution and respect.

Nevertheless, despite a reputation for not drinking, Jews have always been involved in the drinks trade. Wherever Jews have been, they have always made wine – from biblical times, through the Middle Ages in Europe, through to 19th-century Israel and beyond.

In Eastern Europe, Jews were forbidden to do many jobs; but to be distillers, brewers, or tavern keepers was not only permissible, but it almost became the preferred profession for Jews in Poland and Russia.

In America, when the country, in an act of self-flagellation, decided to introduce Prohibition (of alcohol), it was the new immigrant Jews who became bootleggers, importing and producing alcohol to break the ban. In those days, the Jews were the producers and traders, and the Italians were the drivers. Together they sowed the seeds for the rebirth of an alcohol industry in the US.

Seagram, which became the largest spirits company

in the world, was founded out of the ashes of Prohibition by the Bronfman family; and the founder, Samuel Bronfman, was an ex-bootlegger.

The whole American distribution network of wines and spirits is today peppered by Jewish-owned companies, led by the mammoth Southern Wine & Spirits, the largest drinks distributor in the world.

In Israel today there are 350 wineries and numerous domestic and garagiste (small-scale, entrepreneurial) wineries. Yet, despite the wine revolution that has taken place here, consumption remains low, at five to six liters per head maximum.

Paradoxically, for a people for whom drinking in quantity is a rarity, the association of wine with Judaism is particularly strong.

For those in the wine trade like myself, what a wonderful religion it is that encourages the purchase of wine every week in order to sanctify Shabbat. The requirement to drink four glasses of wine at Passover, and the extra Seder night in the Diaspora, make Passover the equivalent in sales to Christmas in the Western world.

And then there is Purim, when this people so associated with wine and restraint is encouraged on one day of the year to drink with total abandon.

Each has his own poison. For the Ashkenazi Jew, the choice of spirit is likely to be vodka. In Israel, vodka is the largest-selling spirit. The Sephardi Jew will prefer arak, the anise-flavored indigenous spirit of the Mediterranean Basin, which is undergoing a resurgence in Israel. Arak is the perfect accompaniment to Israeli meze dishes. Those who find the flavor of arak too strong can mix it with grapefruit juice and have a refreshing aperitif.

The American Jew will choose whisky, but it will not be bourbon, American or Canadian whiskey, but Scotch whisky. Nor will it be a cheap blended whisky but a characterful malt.

The popularity of whisky and the proliferation of *Kiddush* clubs in the US are phenomena that are difficult to explain. I understand that the popularity is

because a religious Jew may enjoy the finest whiskies with no problems of *kashrut*, whereas with wine and food there are always tempting but forbidden fruits. In Orthodox circles, there are whisky mavens no less knowledgeable than their non-Jewish counterparts.

There is one celebratory meal that takes place on the day of Purim. It is usually a meat meal. It takes place not on the eve of the festival but the next day. It normally lasts a few hours. During the meal, wine is consumed. For once, the emphasis is on quantity, not quality.

WHY IS wine given such a high profile on Purim? Because Queen Vashti was removed and was replaced by Esther at one wine feast, and the downfall of Haman was brought about at another wine feast. These were nothing short of wine-infused banquets, which



TABOR WINERY'S vineyards are ablaze with color in the spring. (Tabor Winery)





(L to R) SYRAH FOR everyone! Zion Estate; Recanati Galil; Yarden. (Imri Meron)

ON THE Purim festival, drinking wine is a blessing. (Barkan Winery)

were common in those days. The Persia of that time was in stark contrast to the ultra-strict Islamic regime of Iran today. Wine parties were all the rage. Just read *Megillat Esther*.

Many even attribute the discovery of wine to Persian folklore. Once upon a time, there was a princess who fell out of favor with King Jamshid and wanted to commit suicide. She saw some grapes that had started fermenting naturally (from the wild yeasts on the grape skin) and thought they looked poisonous. So she ate them and fell into a deep, drunken slumber. When she awoke, the world seemed a brighter place. She told the king of her discovery and was immediately received back into his graces. The secret of wine had been discovered.

A nice story, but who knows if it is true? No need to spoil a good story by the truth.

One of the earliest places archaeologists found evidence of wine was in northwestern Iran in the Zagros Mountains. Wine residue was found in clay jars in a village called Hajji Firuz Tepe, which dated back to 5400 BCE. When you realize this was not so far from Georgia and eastern Turkey, it certainly makes geographical sense.

Then there was the beautifully named Shiraz, which is today Iran's fifth-largest city. In ancient times, Shiraz was known as a center for wine, poetry, and gardens. The most famous poet who came from Shiraz was the national treasurer Hafes (1315-1390). He wrote: "With wine beside a gently flowing brook...."

Before him there were other great Persian poets. Abu Nuwas (756-814) was born in Iran and was known for poems about wine and debauchery. This thought is his: "But drink among roses a rose-red wine." After-

ward, there came Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), who suggested: "Drink wine. This is life eternal."

These three great poets wrote wonderful wine poetry, even after the rise of Islam.

In Judaism, wine is always something to be respected and consumed in moderation. The Persians treated wine in a totally hedonistic way. This lax attitude toward wine was followed in turn by the Greeks and the Romans. To become inebriated was a desired state. There were wine drinking parties, which the Greeks called *symposium*. In Judaism, this was frowned upon, and the Jewish kosher laws were framed partly in opposition to the prevailing Hellenistic attitude toward wine.

THOUGH THE wine lover and connoisseur will be likely to choose high-quality, special wines for the Purim *seuda* (meal), normally – because of the number of people and the emphasis on quantity – more inexpensive wines are chosen.

Purim is a wine-drinking festival. Even the God-fearing Jew who drinks grape juice on festivals and every Shabbat will throw caution to the wind and drink wine on Purim.

As it is a festival where volume is more of an issue than quality, I believe this is the time to focus on wines that cost less than NIS 50. Wines at these price points have never been better, and there is no shame in buying on price. The main wineries offering wines under NIS 50 are the larger ones.

To help you identify them, the largest wineries in Israel and their main entry level labels are Barkan-Segal (Gold Reserve, Classic, Shel Segal); Carmel (Private Collection, Selected); Teperberg (Impression, Vision);

Golan Heights (Hermon); Zion (Imperial, Estate); and Jerusalem (Kings Cellar, Vintage). Your selection of wines under NIS 50 will likely come from one of these large wineries. In memory of Shiraz in Persia, my choice of wine would be Shiraz (or Syrah) to enhance the mood and theme.

The Zion Winery Estate Shiraz is a best buy. The Recanati Galil Syrah is juicy fruity. The Gamla Syrah provides excellent quality per price. Clos de Gat, Flam, and Yarden produce very high-quality Syrahs.

It is customary not only to drink wine at the Purim meal but also to give *mishloach manot* (gift packages of food and drink). This was originally to enable poor people to enjoy a festive meal and normally included baked goods and wine. This could be, at its most basic, a few hamantaschen, what is called in Hebrew *oznei Haman* (Haman's ears), and a 187-ml. bottle of Kiddush wine. However, peer pressure encourages a bit of competition, and some people will attempt to be better than the Joneses (or Cohens) next door. Wine lovers would do well to look to the gift packages that most wineries merchandise, for assistance with innovative choices of gifts for Purim.

Whatever your choice, Purim is a fun festival where wine is an integral part. Enjoy, but drink responsibly. It is not an excuse to get blind drunk! It reminds me of an inscription on a 6th-century BCE chalice I saw in Cyprus. On it was inscribed sound advice for Purim: "Be happy, drink well!" ■

*The writer is a wine trade veteran and a winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*



PURIM OCCURS in springtime, when the vines bud and wildflowers bloom in the vineyards. (Galil Mountain Winery)