

Bottle the passion

• ADAM MONTEFIORE

A regional grouping of wineries has been formed in the area around Zichron Ya'acov. It is called Hanadiv Valley and Shfeya. Rami Bar-Maor of Bar-Maor Winery has gathered together wineries that include Somek, Vitkin, Eyal, Smadar, Shfeya, Vortman, Solomonov, Abaya, Arens and Alona. No sign of the large wineries of the region, Carmel, Binyamina or Tishbi. Wineries with a vineyard in the region that produce a wine from it are able to be part of the group.

I decided to visit two of the wineries. When I went to the little-known Vortman Winery, I did not know what to expect. Maybe this was yet another domestic winemaker deciding to cash in on the current fetish of opening wineries. Possibly the scenario would be some enthusiast thrusting a bottle under my nose with the pride of a child showing off a good grade for his homework. I have become quite practiced at not grimacing, and muttering a bland “interesting” or some equally meaningless statement, so as not to discourage or show disdain.

Then there was the name Vortman. This conjured up images of a Harry Potter villain. Hai Vortman is an academic looking guy. I suppose the close-cropped black curly hair was not very Potter, but the glasses were borderline.

Of course, the visit was anything but what I envisaged. It was exciting, inspirational and totally the opposite of my preconceived ideas. I met someone immersed in the magic of wine, who decided that everything done, albeit on a tiny scale, must be with the maximum personal input and investment. A perfectionist winery owner, winemaker and winegrower, making handcrafted wines with his own hands.

To visit the tiny Vortman Winery, you have no alternative but to visit three different places. First on the list is the vineyard, then the winery and finally the tasting room. The vineyard is in Shfeya, the rocky, stony valley northeast of Zichron Ya'acov. The soils are sandy clay with pebbles, gravel, a little flint and the white limestone stones so prevalent in this area. These sit on a bedrock of deep, hard limestone. The vineyard has a Mediterranean climate, with cooling breezes off the sea, and the valley can trap cold air at nighttime which has a noteworthy cooling effect and brings down average temperatures.

In the vineyard you feel Vortman's passion. The joy and abandonment he feels in the vineyard come across immediately. This quiet, cerebral person, who



RAMI BAR-MAOR of Bar-Maor Winery introducing his wines. (Courtesy)

has a background in computers, is transformed when describing his vineyard. He does not have to explain the release he feels when working there. It is quite apparent. This is someone under no illusion that he grows wine, not grapes.

Then there is the winery situated in downtown Haifa. It is on a minuscule scale but beautifully equipped and spotlessly clean. Here the passion and nature of the vineyard meet the state-of-the-art technology of the winery. It is immediately clear that this is a business that wants to give itself the best possible chance of turning its precious grapes into quality wine.

Finally, the tasting and visitors room is in the serene family home in the leafy Shambour district of Haifa, overlooking the most gorgeous view. Here the grower-winemaker turns into an educator. Sharing his art with someone who is interested is a delight to any artist. Vortman's eyes sparkle as he explains every nuance and consideration in the making of the wine.

You can taste wines with examples of the terroir in a glass bowl in front of you. If you lift your eyes for a moment, you see craggy, stony terraces containing vines and lemon trees, which vie with the more common pines of the forests on Mount Carmel, leading down to the lapping waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

Vortman is a newish kid on the block but is here to stay. He is a sauvignon blanc specialist, using fruit from his

40-year-old vineyard. All his whites are particularly good quality, and the reds are very drinkable with good balance. Also, look out for his Colombar and Carignan, and he has an excellent Petit Verdot.

The natural way

Bar-Maor Winery may be found not far from the Binyamina Railway Station. Rami Bar-Maor is an ex-architect who worked with the famous sculptor Dani Karavan. He is quiet with a dry delivery, sparse on top, with coat-hanger shoulders, but when he gets into his wine and talks about his philosophy, the arms gesticulate, the voice is raised and he becomes more animated. He becomes a different character altogether – rather like the newly opened bottle of wine that does not show itself and appears closed, but after being aerated and allowed to breathe, it begins to show its personality. It appears he lives through his wine. Wine does that sometimes.

He makes his wine from the Hanadiv (benefactor) Valley, named after Baron Edmond de Rothschild, who made the southern part of the Mount Carmel region the main focus of his efforts to renew Israeli winemaking after 2,000 years of stagnation. The vineyard soils are rendzina chalk.

Bar-Maor practices a total laissez-faire way of winemaking with minimum intervention and making wine as naturally as possible. In the vineyard he does

not irrigate artificially. The roots of the vine burrow deeper in search of water and nutrients. At the winery only the free-run juice is used, there are no corrections to acidity, no filtration or cold stabilization. Bar-Maor's methodology gives a life and freshness to the wines that have become his trademark.

He caught the winemaking bug and then helped at the iconic Margalit Winery. A light went on in his mind, and his passion has not been assuaged yet. His wines have bright, colorful labels which are like the wines: Unique expressions of a particular place, made by an individual. The essence of wine: a combination of the wine, person and place.

Bar-Maor's red wines are recommended but his Riesling is also special, as is the top-of-the-range Archetype, an excellent but rare Mediterranean blend of Marselan, Carignan and Syrah.

THESE TWO wineries are among those giving life to the most traditional wine region in Israel, in the valleys surrounding the southern slopes of Mount Carmel. Both Vortman and Bar-Maor make authentic wines representing the terroir of their respective vineyards. If you want to know what bottled passion tastes like, try the wines!

The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is known as “the English voice of Israeli wine.”
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VORTMAN WINERY'S old vineyard in the Shfeya Valley near Zichron Ya'acov. (Courtesy)



HAI VORTMAN of Vortman Winery taking a barrel sample. (Courtesy)



Vortman Sauvignon blanc 2016

Mainly sauvignon blanc with a touch of Colombard. Unoaked. The wine has a greenish tint. It is aromatic, blowsy with tropical notes, flavorful with a slight bitterness on the finish which actually makes it more refreshing. NIS 70



Vortman Fumé blanc 2015

Made from sauvignon blanc aged in barrels. The wine has a complex fresh nose combining tropical with citrus notes, a fruit-led flavor and a long refreshing finish. The oak is not overly apparent. NIS 95



Vortman Shambour 2013

A blend of cabernet sauvignon, Carignan, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Fruit forward, mouth-filling flavor with a good, well-defined finish. Represents great value. NIS 80



Vortman Levant 2014

A blend of Merlot, Petite Sirah, Petit Verdot and cabernet sauvignon. Medium-bodied, nicely weighted wine. Fruit is complex, restrained but not in your face. Blackberry fruit is backed by hints of Mediterranean herbs. Nice length on the finish. NIS 100



Bar-Maor Tammuz 2014

A summer wine made mainly from Merlot. Fruity, refreshing with good acidity. NIS 110



Bar-Maor Lilith 2014

A cabernet sauvignon-based blend, balanced with a little Syrah. The most conventional of Bar-Maor's wines. Full bodied with prominent ripe black fruit aromas, quite an oaky backdrop and a long balanced finish. NIS 119



Bar-Maor Cabernet Franc 2014

This wine has attractive aromas with a combination of red and black fruits and a touch of green pepper. The flavor is fruitful with a touch of a herbaceous character. The tannins and acidity provide grip and accompany this wine through to the finish. NIS 135



Bar-Maor Syrah 2014

This full-bodied wine has all the black fruit associated with a Syrah with a smokiness and a touch of leather. The wine has good acidity and well-integrated tannins. It is big but refreshing with a long finish. NIS 145