

From vine to glass



HEDAI OFFAIM is a true vigneron, caring for the vines and growing wine in his vineyards. (Photos: Dan Perez)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Hedai Offaim never seems happier than when he is in his orchard, meandering from tree to tree, biting into a fig or whatever is ripe at the time, while contemplating this land's rich bounty. A love of nature he shares with many farmers and agriculturists.

What Hedai has that many of the others don't is that his agriculture is reinforced by deep spiritualism. He is extraordinarily well-read and has vast knowledge of literature and both biblical and religious sources. Like many great communicators, he plucks the appropriate quote or saying and sprinkles his conversation with words of poets and sages. He does not use this as a weapon to show off or batter us with his deep and wide knowledge, but it fits most easily into his explanations, always in the right place. Appropriate like a sprinkling of water onto a parched houseplant.

He is a compact figure, with the ever-present blue shirt and jeans. This is the uniform of a worker, a man of the soil, not a showman. His most noticeable feature is a long and large well-coiffed salt-and-pepper beard, which he occasionally pulls, massages, and strokes. He is not a demonstrative speaker. He does not alter the tone of his voice to make a point or speak louder with waving arms to attract attention. His delivery is low-key but authentic.

What differs is the light and sparkle in his eyes. When you see his eyes brighten, then listen very closely.

Hedai Offaim is a national treasure. All at the same time, he is a farmer and restaurateur, a grower and a chef, a lover of nature and a food guru, an entrepreneur and writer, a Torah scholar and musician. He is a man of the soil with his hands in the earth and an intellectual with his head in the clouds. He is also a cheesemaker and winemaker. Nature is his kitchen, and he loves whatever and everything he does with an unrelenting passion.

He was born in Haifa in 1979. His parents were a Holocaust survivor from Poland and a native kibbutznik. In 2008, he and his brother, Yinon, founded the Offaim Farm in the Arava Valley. He metamorphosed into the person we know after a traumatic event we both experienced from different angles. In 2009, Ehud Efrati z"l was tragically killed well before his time in Gaza while serving on reserve duty. He left behind his wife and young children.

I was then working for Carmel Winery, and the Efrati family was part of Agudat Hacormim, the wine growers cooperative. Efrati had just founded a small family winery and was one of a new wave of younger, enterprising wine growers. He was the quintessential Israeli character who spread pride and admiration among all those who knew him. Like everyone, we were swept up in the tragedy. I well remember the annual bicycle rally in

his memory and Ehud Park in Zichron Ya'acov, a place of calmness and tranquility, established in his name.

Efrati was a friend of the Offaims, and this tragic event galvanized the pioneering brothers to look at their business with new eyes. Life can be fleeting and too short. They decided to go full steam ahead without compromise. The Offaim brothers changed gear.

THEIR LARGE farm in the Arava is based on the principles of sustainability, credibility, and authenticity. They raise chickens for eggs and goats for goat's cheese, and grow dates, mangoes, and vegetables. They then opened café-restaurants and shops to retail their produce. Everything is homemade or home-grown. They themselves don't call it "farm to table" but "seed to table."

Because he is a great communicator, Hedai Offaim has become a celebrity. This is a responsibility he carries with aplomb. Though it is important to say that there is not a smidgen of arrogance or a hint of missionary zeal in his delivery. I get the feeling his motivation is simply that he just loves sharing, but it is more than that. He feels almost a compulsion to share and explain. And of course, he talks to us with a humble modesty, total integrity, yet with an absolute belief in his way. He has written books, had regular columns in newspapers, and frequently appears on social media. He is a food lifestyle guru with quite a following.

The latest fetish for this mercurial and



fascinating person is winemaking. He is not new to wine and has always appreciated the fruit of the vine. He described Elena Zimbalista as an early influence. She only made white wines. When it came to founding his winery, he just had to do it right. This he did with obsessive attention to detail, but this does not preclude him from being flexible, creative, and prepared to follow his gut instinct. He has shown he is not locked into a "should do" mentality. You see this in both the planting of the vineyard and in his making of the wine. He is not tied down by slavishly following tradition, but is prepared to forge his own path backed by his own research and belief.

It was inconceivable for him not to grow his own wine. Wine at its best is an expression of a person and a place. Offaim decided to say this in a different way and personalize it. He called his winery Mekomi, which means "My Place." The logo is a figure with a ladder inspired by a quote by A.D. Gordon, the spiritual thinker behind Labor Zionism. The idea is that the ladder goes to heaven, but you have to decide where to put it. Offaim placed his ladder in the valley of the Hak-



FOR THIS year's harvest, the wines were received at the new winery. Mekomi makes wine only from its own vineyards.



MEKOMI WINERY'S white wines.

lil and Shelah streams, in the biblically known Elah Valley. This is part of the Judean Foothills, backed by the Judean Hills with constant breezes from the Mediterranean. These valleys are traps for cold air, which results in plenty of cold spells in the vine-growing calendar.

Mekomi Winery was founded in 2021. This was the year he planted his vineyard, which has provided the fruit for the last three vintages. Just in time for the 2026 harvest, the winery settled into its new permanent home. This is a brand new, purpose-built winery building, situated in Moshav Tzafririm.

When I visited, he suggested we first go to the vineyards. I love that. If I had not seen the vineyard, I would feel I had not visited the winery. As we entered his patch, he proudly showed me the orchard he had planted, puffing his chest like a grandfather introducing his grandchildren. This is a cosmopolitan gathering of over 120 fruit trees of every description.

He has two vineyards: one more traditional (VSP) style and the other, higher density, in an upright goblet style, but not low to the ground in the regular bush vine style. He has planted

Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc, Roussanne, and Assyrtiko for white wines, and Carignan, Grenache, and Cinsault for reds.

He then did something very rare in our business. Most new wineries fill a space in an existing workspace. He literally built a winery from the foundations up. It has a striking design. There are large glass windows and a welcoming patio overlooking the Givat Yeshayahu vineyards snaking through the valley. The tanks, press and hospitality table, and service bar are on one level, and the barrel cellar is below. It is a beautiful winery.

No doubt, Offaim is thriving in his latest reincarnation as a winemaker. He appreciates and loves both the journey and the process. He revels in the difference of the seasons and the idea of the work, the attentiveness, and flowing with nature. He sees these as integral parts of the vigneron. He loves the vagaries of nature, the challenges each day brings, and everything about the idea that he is growing his own wine. He enjoys the intellectual aspect no less than the tasting and winemaking. The brainstorm-

ing and in-depth discussions are no less important and just as fun.

Hedai Offaim is very au fait with the wineries, winemakers, and wines that surround us. He is well informed, up to date, and in contact with everyone. His winemaking guru, though, is Ya'acov Oryah of Pinto Winery and Ya'acov Oryah Wines. I have described Oryah as the "curious winemaking intellectual." As such, these two winemaking intellectuals are a perfect match. They speak the same language.

MEKOMI WINES are original with a splash of individuality and creativity. The best dishes or cocktails have an element of contrast that brings out qualities and flavors. Each of Mekomi Winery's white wines has a twist that defies the norm. These are wines to drink, enjoy, and talk about. They have not come out of some drawer in the winemaker manual. Each is a totally authentic expression of the terroir and the person who made it.

I have tasted these white wines:

Amok b'Tal (deep in dew) 2025. Mainly Chardonnay, balanced with

a little Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc. This has the full mouthfeel of Chardonnay, but with a lightness and freshness that belies most Chardonnays. It has a delightful, lively finish. A charming wine, which for me, is the epitome of spring.

Etz Eshkolit (grapefruit tree) 2025. This is a Sauvignon Blanc in disguise, but the wine is well named. It is crisp with an unmistakable hint of grapefruit, which is incidentally Hedai Offaim's favorite fruit. It has a unique and, to me, very attractive concentrated fruit finish, with a slight bitterness. It is refreshingly different, interesting, and very enjoyable.

Hazman Hakafri (country time) 2025. A Chenin Blanc. It is fragrant, with delicate floral notes and citrus aromas. It is a wine with energy, texture, and minerality. I also tasted the 2024. Bottle age does it no harm at all. I think this was my favorite of the Mekomi wines I tasted.

Hapa'am Haba'a (the next time) 2025. This was a surprise. It was a wolf in sheep's clothing, a white masquerading as a red. It had fruit, herbal notes, an almost oily texture, with spice and orange peel bitterness on the finish. An original, and I loved it.

When we met, I described his winemaking as representing everything on the way from vine to wine. "No," he corrected me, "from vine to the glass." It is for him the wine in the glass that is the essence of the game.

Central to everything is the table where it all comes together. This may be in his home, at one of their café restaurants, at the winery in front of the tanks, or on the patio overlooking the hills, valley, and vineyards. This is where the hospitality, camaraderie, and food and wine blend together.

There is one quote from Hedai Offaim that I love. He has written: "Food can never offer comfort, nor can recipes train the palate. It is only meals that matter and the people that eat them." I always say food, wine, and companionship are a holy trinity. It is like a three-legged stool. If one leg is missing, it all collapses.

Hedai Offaim takes this further. For him, the bread and cheese on your plate and the wine in your glass have not fulfilled their purpose if they are not enjoyed by family, friends, or companions eating, drinking, and sharing the experience together.

I previously said Offaim was most happy in his *bustan* (orchard). Thinking again, I think he is most fulfilled cooking with products he has grown or nurtured, surrounded by happy and smiling people enjoying his food and wine. This, for him, is his *raison d'être*. It is all about togetherness with a plate in front of you and a glass in hand. ■

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. www.adammontefiore.com