



From cowshed to chicken coop

Vitkin, one of Israel's finest boutique wineries, is well worth a visit

■ By ADAM MONTEFIORE

Head the one about the architect, carpenter, handyman and pastry chef? I know it does not go quite like the nursery rhyme about the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker, but it does tell a story. What do these people have in common? They are all from one family, and they founded a winery in 2001.

I am referring to Vitkin Winery. The architect, Sharona Paz-Belogolovsky, owns the winery with her husband, handyman and jack-of-all-trades Doron Belogolovsky. The carpenter is Avraham Paz, the father of Sharona.

In 2002 they built a winery in the cowshed owned by Doron's grandparents in Kfar Vitkin, situated in the coastal Sharon Plain. Doron, the practical one, taught himself to make wine with the help and

encouragement of the pastry chef.

I visited the original winery. A place that is tidy, orderly and with the mantra "Cleanliness is next to godliness" somehow enhances the feelings about the quality of the wine. Vitkin Winery was small but immaculate.

Fast forward to 2015, and they have moved to new premises, this time in a building that used to be a chicken coop. It is an impressive building. The architect designed the winery, the handyman built it, and the carpenter made the furniture.

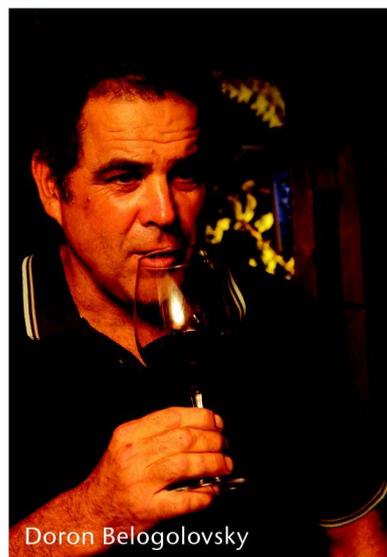
There is no single bit of bric-a-brac or even the smallest piece of furniture that does not have sentimental significance. It is either something handed down in the family through the generations or handcrafted by the talented members of the Vitkin family. The wines aren't bad, either.

Vitkin is one of Israel's finest boutique

wineries. It has a name for quality, originality and authenticity. Most of the credit for this is due to the pastry chef, who makes the wine. In fact, Assaf Paz, brother of Sharona, put down his spatula and rolling pin a long time ago. He studied wine in Bordeaux in the late 1990s, traveled to California and Australia and became a winemaker.

I first came across him when I was working for the Golan Heights Winery. He contacted me because he wanted wine for a tasting of Israeli wines to be held in Bordeaux. I was reluctant to help. You have no idea how many requests one gets like this. But he was very self-confident, very persistent and was not put off by my reluctance. He was a "noodge," but in the nicest possible way. Charming and at the same time determined to follow through. In the end, he got what he wanted.

He returned to Israel as the winemaker for



Doron Belogolovsky



Sharona Paz-Belogolovsky

Tishbi Winery. Then he worked with me at Carmel Winery (by that time I had moved to Carmel.) He was responsible for the boutique winery at Zichron Ya'acov Cellars. Later he moved to Binyamina Winery and was even for a short time at Segal Wines. This in itself must make him one of the more traveled winemakers in Israel. Now he is devoting himself full time to Vitkin.

Assaf is a perky, optimistic character, usually smiling, who likes to think out of the box. From the beginning, he wanted to make Israeli wines rather than international wines. On his suggestion, the winery decided to concentrate only on more unusual or exotic varieties. For him, ABC (the "Anything But Chardonnay" movement) also meant no Cabernet Sauvignon, no Merlot and no Sauvignon Blanc. His was the first winery to make this choice and, as such, he became the main pioneer of the Mediterranean trend that now has many adherents.

He is like his talented father, who can look at a barrel and visualize how he can fashion furniture from it. Paz has the ability to look at an old rundown vineyard with very high yields and envisage what he can get out of it. For instance, looking at an old vineyard in the Zichron area, he thought, "What if I take only these rows and that plot, reduce yields and try to make a quality wine?"

And that is what he did. He was able to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear by using fruit previously used for kiddush wine to make a quality Carignan. It is amazing what can be done by looking at the same grapes in a different way, with the desire to make a quality wine and the knowledge and technology to back it up. Is there anything that symbolizes the Israeli wine revolution more than this? The move from sweet to dry, and from the most basic level to quality.

The Vitkin Carignan 2002 and Petite Sirah 2003 were signposts for the Israeli wine industry as a whole. Just to make sure we got the picture, he encouraged the same focus at Carmel with support of the chief winemaker, and they produced their first Appellation Carignan and Petite Sirah wines in 2004.

I recently did a tasting of all the country's leading Carignans, and the Vitkin finished in first place. Not for nothing is Assaf known as "Mr. Carignan." His interest in this variety stems back to 1999 when, while still in Bordeaux, he was invited to a wine tasting of Priorat wines that blew his

mind. Priorat, in the Catalonian region of Spain, is one of the few regions in the world where old vine Carignan is given respect. Later on, at a time when other winemakers were visiting Napa Valley, Bordeaux, Barossa Valley and Tuscany, he chose to visit Priorat to learn the secrets of the canny Catalonians.

Today Vitkin Winery is a specialist in the more unusual varieties like Carignan, Petite Sirah and Cabernet Franc. He also makes a Pinot Noir (it is so Assaf Paz, that he would try!) and a Riesling (Johannisberg, not Emerald), which is one of the better examples of this variety in Israel.

His entry-level wines, branded with the labels "Israeli Journey" are extremely popular restaurant wines. They are full of flavor, yet refreshing with good acidity. There are red, white and rosé, which are wines to drink while sitting outside in Jaffa or Acre eating mezze, fish and grilled meat, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. It goes without saying that they represent excellent value.

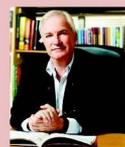
The prestige blend is a wine called Shorashim, which means "roots." Not surpris-

ingly, it is a Mediterranean style blend and is made only in better vintages. This is a winery for whom roots, origins and family are of paramount importance.

Vitkin's wines are sourced from the Judean Hills, Mount Carmel, the Upper Galilee and the Golan Heights. In other words, Paz tries to source from the best region for the varieties he works with. They also have plans to plant a vineyard in front of the winery.

So Vitkin Winery has progressed from the cowshed to the chicken coop. The new winery is well worth a visit. Furthermore, from the 2015 vintage, the wines will be kosher for the first time. The winery's high quality and good value wines are a light-house, showing the way for the industry as a whole. ■

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The Vitkin wines I recently tasted were as follows:

White Israeli Journey 2014

A white wine made from Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Viognier, Colombard and Gewurztraminer. Broad flavored with a nose of apricot, floral notes and a hint of cut hay. It has a refreshing finish.

NIS 75



Red Israeli Journey 2013

A super drinking wine. It is a blend of Carignan, Syrah and Cabernet Franc. Ripe, fruity aroma, with a chewy flavor mid-palate and a refreshing finish that demands you take another glass.

NIS 75

Vitkin Carignan 2011

The aroma of this Carignan is reminiscent of plums, black cherry with a hint of Mediterranean herbs. In the mouth, it has a complex dried fruit character and long balanced finish.

NIS 105



Vitkin Riesling 2013

A fragrant, classic Riesling with delicate but complex aromas of citrus blossom, wild flowers and a petroleum note and a piercing acidity.

NIS 90



Pink Israeli Journey 2014

A crisp, strawberry colored rosé made from Carignan and Grenache grapes. It has a delicate berry aroma and excellent acidity. This is the year of rosé.

NIS 75



Vitkin Petite Sirah 2010

A deep-colored wine with an aroma of black fruits and a tantalizing hint of violets. The taste is meaty, earthy, even spicy, and the finish is long. This is a wine for carnivores.

NIS 125