

PLANTING HISTORY



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Think of the hundreds of times you ate the fleshy part of a grape, separating the pips with your tongue before spitting them out. Did you ever stop to think what happened to those pips? Did any of them have a name, or maybe a history? A grape pip is something so small that it is difficult to pick one up with the thumb and forefinger. Well, two grape pips have recently become pretty famous in wine circles.

Prof. Guy Bar-Oz of the University of Haifa is the person responsible for the research. He is a bioarchaeologist at the School of Archaeology and Maritime Cultures. He has been involved in ongoing, groundbreaking research regarding the history of the wine industry in the Negev Desert.

Excavations have given proof of a flourishing wine industry in the Byzantine and early Arab period, especially at sites like Shivta, Halutza, Nitzana, and Avdat. For instance, by going through the ancient trash, he and his colleagues discovered that the thriving Byzantine wine industry came to an end because of plague, earthquakes, and economic depression, and not as previously thought, because of the Muslim prohibition of alcohol. That is an over-simplification of some incredibly complex research, but you get the idea. There is some amazing bioarchaeological work going on unlocking the secrets of the past.

Back to those grapes. A number of grape pips were found in an enclosed stone room in the ruins of Avdat in the heart of the Negev. Now Avdat is a national park with Nabataean, Roman, and Byzantine roots. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its large, well-preserved wine presses titillate our imagination. There, they made wine in very large quantities. Avdat connected the spice route between Petra and Gaza. Presumably, a pip thrown in the trash or spat on the ground would be a loner. However, grape pips found in groups together are more likely to have been cultivated or used for winemaking. Most of the pips are shy and give scant information, especially after hundreds of years. They remind me of the genie in the Aladdin story, stuck in the oil lamp for an eternity. We will never know his story until he gets out. The arbitrary results of years of research with numerous samples only hit the jackpot occasionally. Only these two pips yielded enough information to make startling discoveries. A pip hidden from the world for centuries is not certain to yield its secrets, but two of them decided to become famous.

Under the painstaking work of Meirav Meiri of Tel Aviv University and researchers from the Antiquities Authority, these two grape pips sang. Meiri is curator of bioarchaeology and head of the animal and plant ancient DNA at the Steinhardt Museum in Tel Aviv. Wearing something akin to space suits to avoid contamination, the researchers went about their delicate work with no certainty of success. The pips were cut in half. One half went for DNA testing, and the other for



PROF. GUY BAR-OZ from the University of Haifa at the ceremonial planting of the ancient varieties in a new vineyard at Avdat. (Devorin Media)

A STUDY of tiny grape pips found at Avdat in the heart of the Negev Desert. (Dr. Meirav Meiri)

carbon dating. Again, this is grossly simplifying a very complicated process. Two of them, though, yielded enough information to electrify the wine world.

Now, we know that Zion Winery, founded by the Shor family in 1848, used the Holy Land indigenous varieties to make wine. However, the possibilities and new interest only came to light more recently, when the Cremisan Monastery decided to focus on local varieties in 2008. When Recanati Winery launched its Marawi and Bittuni, it made more noise. The world's press talked in excited tones about the wines that King David and Jesus drank, but this was more the poetic license of dreamers rather than having a smidgen of concrete scientific evidence. Maybe you should not spoil a good story by the truth! Also, most of the local varieties used to make wine from the Hebron region.

The desert grapes pips of Avdat did provide valuable information. Firstly, they dated approximately from 900 CE. That was during the early Muslim period, but monasteries and Christian enclaves continued to make wine, and they would have done so at Avdat, too. Secondly, and this is incredible, the pips were found to correspond to varieties known today. One matches a red variety known as Syriki. Could it possibly derive from the word “sorek,” which has wine connotations, or maybe “Syria,” a geographical connection? Anyway, this variety is also known in Greece (in particular Crete) and Lebanon, where it is called Aswad Karech). The other matched a local white variety we call Be’er. This was a wild vine discovered by a well (be’er in Hebrew) at Palmahim, in the southern Coastal Plain. Barkan Winery took cuttings, propagated them, and planted the vines to produce a wine.



Well, the desert Be’er was planted at Avdat over 1,100 years ago. Could it have been used to make the famous Gaza sweet white wine that was exported throughout the Mediterranean? They were shipped in the recognizable torpedo-shaped Gazan amphorae. This is educated conjecture, trying to connect the dots, but who knows?

What we do know is that it is the oldest white grape pip to be identified; the scientific journals and wine magazines, like *Wine Spectator* and *Decanter*, were quick to bring the news to interested ears around the world.

In those days, wines were referred to by the port from where they were exported or the style of wine rather than the grape variety. So Jewish literature in the Bible and Talmud does not talk about grape varieties. One of my constant beefs is that we research our sliver of a country like an island. If we could share our research with Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Cyprus, who knows what secrets could be revealed? After all, under the Ottoman Empire, there were no borders. It is highly unlikely that the Dabouki variety, for example, was confined just to the region that would later become Israel.

ANYWAY, I recently found myself traveling to Avdat to witness the planting of a vineyard, not of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, but of ancient grape



PINTO WINERY'S new vineyard in Yeruham.
(David Silverman)



WELL-PRESERVED wine press from Byzantine times at Shivta in the desert. (Ron Peled)

varieties Be'er, Syriki, and Dabouki. After 1,000 years, they returned to Avdat! The idea was to plant an educational vineyard to recreate the lost varieties of the Negev Highlands. Bar-Oz received a grant from the European Research Council to replant these ancient varieties so the research may be continued. Analyzing the molecular signatures and genetics of these varieties could give clues of what is needed to survive in an arid climate.

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority, University of Haifa, Antiquities Authority, Merage Foundation Israel, and Ramat Negev Regional Council hosted the moving event. There, I was pleased to see Meiri again. We had met previously. She is so quiet and modest but obviously brilliant. I find her research breathtaking.

Mostly, I was pleased and honored to meet with Bar-Oz. He gave a fascinating speech. He is a force of nature. Most academic researchers I meet are dry, scientific types and not great communicators. They often have the passion of a fossil and speak in an obscure language of the researcher that is difficult to follow. Bar-Oz defies the norm. He is dynamic, charismatic, bursting with information, and overflowing with passion for the subject. I wish for all students and tourists that they will find teachers of history and tour guides with an ounce of his knowledge and a sprinkling of his stardust ability to explain, enthuse, and bring the ancient to life. We will be following his research carefully and with great attention, and I look forward to when I next have the opportunity to hear him speak again.

THE NEGEV makes up over half the country. It is our largest wine region in area, but the smallest in the number of vineyards. The first desert vineyards in our times were planted by Carmel at Ramat Arad in 1988, followed by Tishbi at Sde Boker, Barkan at Mitzpe Ramon, Carmey Avdat, and Ramat Negev Winery at Kadesh Barnea in the 1990s. The first desert wineries founded were Kadesh Barnea in 1997, Sde Boker in 1999, and Yatir in 2000. Now there are 40 wineries from the northern Negev to Eilat. These make up the Negev Wine Club so magnificently encouraged and supported by the Merage Foundation.

Negev wineries are generally small and idiosyncratic, making wines that are highly individual, characterful, and authentic. The scene is not blemished by large or medium-sized commercial wineries in the area. It



ANCIENT WINE press at Avdat overlooking a modern vineyard (dark strip, top C).
(Danna Avidan)

takes a special sort of character to settle in the desert, plant vines, and grow a vineyard and make wine. So, the characters one meets on the Negev wine route are not replicated elsewhere. The most high-profile Negev wines are made by wineries such as Nana, Midbar, Pinto, Ramat Negev, and Yatir. However, the real interest is knocking on a cellar door and finding someone totally original behind it, producing something unique. Remember, wine is a product of a person and a place. That is the magic that is particularly apparent in the Negev.

The Negev is certainly a fascinating place, well worth exploring. For tourists, this is the best place for agritourism in the country. Find a winery you want to visit, and around it will be places to stay, eat, visit, and party in the unique way that only the desert offers. For wine lovers, including Israelis, the Negev is relatively new as a wine destination and is still regarded as quite exotic. Sometimes the curiosity can propel one to drive south, just to see what a desert vineyard looks like and appreciate how a desert wine tastes. As for winemakers from all over the world, the Negev is a must. The research and development being undertaken by academics, growers, and winemakers provide hidden information for those seeking solutions and creative ideas to cope with the fears of global warming.

When I first came to Israel, in 1989, there were wines called Avdat produced by Carmel. As a newbie, I asked what was Avdat? I was told "Ah, it is a place where they used to make wine."

After the ritual, celebratory planting, we walked up the slope to the Roman villa of Avdat, where we were given a tasting of Negev wines by the Desert Wine Bar of Mitzpe Ramon. It lists as many desert wines as anywhere in the world, I should think. After tasting the wines, I quietly wandered off with Zvi Remek of Sde Boker Winery to the far side of the archaeological site to go to see one of the ancient wine presses. Standing next to the wine press, I was exhilarated to see that we were overlooking a large vineyard of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, a defiant patch of green, surrounded by the beige, browns, and yellows of the sandy desert. Here was a 1,500-year-old wine press, an established modern vineyard, and a new vineyard of ancient varieties all in close proximity.

The old and ancient mingling with the new, and combining with a look to the future. All in one place. That in a nutshell is what makes the Avdat story so special. ■

The writer is a winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com