

# Rock on, Cindy and Anna



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**W**ine is well covered by Jewish festivals and lifestyle events. There is no lack of opportunities in the Jewish year to say the blessing over wine and enjoy a few glasses and feel righteous at the same time. Hanukka, though, is a festival that I am at a loss to decide which wine to write about, which is great, because it gives me an excuse to write about olive oil.

I personally feel the olive and the vine are Siamese twins. They thrive in the same stony, unfertile land where other things are unable to grow. They are ever present all over the Mediterranean, and no less in the Eastern Mediterranean and also in Israel.

Nearly every Israeli landscape contains vines standing up like soldiers or the shimmering green, silvery leaves of the olive tree. The look is biblical and yet it also is contemporary.

Each of the Seven Species is considered blessed. Yet I have always regarded wine and olive oil to be superior and in a world of their own. The final products of the vine and olive tree are so elevated and extraordinary that it is hard to believe that they come from a mere fruit like the grape and olive.

They stand out for me as the ultimate symbols of Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel, almost more than anything, because they are grounded in earth and not besmirched by politics or gimmicks.

Quite apart from this being the year that we welcomed my newest granddaughter, who is named Olive, there is nothing about the tree and its produce that I do

not like. I love the beauty of the olive grove, the silhouette of the tree and its leaves, the tastiness of the fruit and also the olive oil which is a magical product.

An Israeli salad with olive oil and lemon juice beats a vinaigrette any time. There is nothing better than fish cooked under the grill with nothing added apart from olive oil and fresh herbs. How about bruschetta with olive oil drizzled on it?

Look at the Mediterranean diet today and then understand that in biblical times grain, wine and olive oil were the mainstays of the economy. Olive oil and wine go back to the very dawn of the Jewish people in Israel. There is nothing new under the sun. Thucydides wrote that man became civilized when he began to cultivate the olive tree and vine.

Thirty years ago though, we did not write about olive oil – maybe in the Israeli Arab or Palestinian sector, yes, but certainly not in Jewish Israel. Then we were not talking about handcrafted wines from boutique wineries or small dairies with handmade cheeses either.

Today, Israeli wine and olive oil together are the best expression of the Mediterranean diet, and are symbols of the new quality Israeli cuisine. They were forerunners and are now standard bearers of the culinary revolution here.

When I heard about Sindyanna olive oil, I thought it was a joint venture between Cindy and Anna. Then I was traveling abroad, saw their bright, colorful, instantly attractive labels and thought, how striking. When I saw it was from Israel, and I thought it curious I did not know them. However, when later I tasted the olive oil by chance, I thought I must find out more.

In fact Sindyanna is not a joint venture between Sin-

dy and Anna, but a non-profit partnership between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arab women. It is also so much more than just an olive oil. Sindyanna refers to the Palestinian oak tree, which forms the logo of Sindyanna of Galilee.

The female-led organization promotes the concepts of business for peace and the Fair Trade movement in Israel. Sindyanna offers educational help and economic opportunities to Arab women, teaching them a trade and helping them to find job opportunities.

It creates harmony and cooperation between Jews and Arabs at a time when many seem to have an interest in widening the gaps rather than closing them. Incidentally, the olive oil industry unites Israelis like no other product. Jews, Arabs, Druse and Circassians all cultivate olive groves.

It is heartwarming to see the strides Sindyanna has made since it was founded in 1996. It is all about empowering women. This is gradually happening in both haredi and Arab society and it is a must if the Israeli economy is to survive unequal burdens in the future.

Today they have a beautiful visitor's center in Kafr Kana, which was opened in 2015. This was where, according to the New Testament, Jesus turned the water into wine. By the way, what a great miracle to master! (When we show tourists around the Galilee, we explain that this was where Jesus changed water into wine, but unfortunately it took 2,000 years before the wine in Israel was any good!)

The visitors' center is a meeting place, a center for vocational training, and a Fair Trade shop of products from the surrounding villages. However, apart from the feeling that something very good and positive is hap-





THE OLIVE harvest by volunteers at 'the Scottish Grove' in the Jezreel Valley. (Yoram Ron)



THE BEAUTY of Sindyanna's olive grove. (Erez Harodi)



ISRAELI CHILDREN, both Arab and Jewish, worked together to design the labels. (Yoram Ron)



(Courtesy)

#### Extra Unified Olive Oil (500 ml.)

The house blend is a combination of Barnea, Coratina and Picual. I found it reasonably similar to the Barnea. Delicate fruity nose, a grassiness, a touch of pepperiness and a harmonious finish. Everything in proportion, but nothing too bold. NIS 38

#### Extra Positive Olive Oil (500 ml.)

This is a Coratina olive oil. Probably ideal for those who are used to Souri. Aromatic, green, harsh but in a nice way, peppery and with the bitterness on the finish that many look for. NIS 38

#### Extra Hopeful Olive Oil (500 ml.)

A varietal Barnea. Remember Souri is indigenous to the whole Levant, whereas Barnea is an Israeli variety. It has a touch of green apple, with a slight herbaceous character, a backdrop of mown hay and a delicate peppery finish. NIS 38

#### Extra Peaceful Olive Oil (500 ml.)

This is the organic blend with the black label. It is a blend of Barnea and Coratina from their organic olive grove in Wadi Ara. They complement each other perfectly: the delicate grassy and fruity notes of the Barnea with the spicy, green bitterness of the Coratina. NIS 46

pening here, they also produce a very good olive oil.

The labels for a start are bright and immediately garner interest. They were designed by the Arab and Jewish children and they have a child's innocence, brightness and are wonderfully uncomplicated. The names are "Peaceful," "Hopeful," "Positive" and "Unified," each with the prefix "Extra." The names may smack of lefty liberalness and pigs-might-fly optimism, but hey, we are talking about Jewish cooperation with Arabs here and something called hope. I am all for it.

The products themselves will stand the scrutiny of olive oil experts. They are genuinely good. They specialize in Barnea, an Israeli variety created by Prof. Shimon Lavie. It has gone on to be an international success, particularly in Australia and Argentina.

The fruit is small and oblong and it is easier to grow than the Souri. It produces oil with a delicate sweetness and fruitiness and an unmistakable aroma of mown hay. It is sometimes blended with the Italian Coratina, which provides the harsh green flavors and bitterness that we sometimes look for in Eastern Mediterranean olive oils. It is also blended with the Spanish variety, Picual, which is mild and balances the green fruit with hints of green tomato and tomato leaves. It represents moderation and harmony and is a useful blender.

A restaurant has a chef, a winery a winemaker, a brewery a brewmaster and a distillery a master distiller. Sindyanna has Ehud Soriano, a quality olive oil consultant and head of the Israel official olive oil tasting panel, a useful man to have on your side if you are aiming for top quality. He prides himself on consulting 'from the olive grove to the bottle.'

A successful project has many fathers. However,

if I were to mention just one here, it would be CEO Hadas Lahav. Born in a kibbutz near Lake Kinneret, she co-founded Sindyanna. She says: "We will not be able to live in a normal place if we do not find ways to work with our neighbors and Arabs can't live in Israel without working with the Jewish community either," she says, adding, "Right now we are dreaming, but every change in the world started from an idea, from a dream."

I met her expecting to find a benign, do-gooder sort of volunteer. Instead I found someone with years of experience of olive oil from the tree to the bottle, very knowledgeable and a pusher. If I said bulldozer, she might not think it a compliment, but I was full of admiration for her single-mindedness and determination, which she does not attempt to hide. The idea is great and the quality proven, but nothing works without the people to drive it forward and she has a great team.

In my world, a bottle of wine is the ultimate gift. I also put the blessing of the finest Extra Virgin Cold Pressed Olive Oil in the same category. This Hanukka why not light your Hanukkia using olive oil to celebrate the existence of this elixir, and give your host a special bottle of Israeli olive oil as a gift?

I can vouch for the quality of Sindyanna's olive oils, but there are many very good olive oils about. However, if you choose a Sindyanna olive oil you would be supporting a social cause more important than olive oil. Furthermore, I imagine Sindy and Anna would be pleased. ■

*The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years and is known as the 'English voice of Israeli wine.'*  
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