



GUY HARAN, one of the young people leading Israeli wine forward, is focusing on wine tourism. (Courtesy)

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Tourism worldwide has been devastated with the novel coronavirus plague and one of the casualties is wine tourism. Tourism is so important to Israel and wine tourism is crucial for Brand Israel. I have therefore decided to focus on wine tourism for this article, to raise morale and to start thinking again about “after the war.”

Wine tourism in Israel starts with one arm tied behind its back, and the restriction is self-inflicted. Wineries, instead of being part of the agricultural scene – like everywhere else in the world – are tucked away in industrial areas. This is because the powers that be view wine as an industry, rather than as an offshoot of agriculture.

In the world of wine tourism, we don’t have a natural agritourism like in Italy, where the local winery, vineyard, restaurant, hotel and olive press coexist, blending into the nearby village. We don’t have a series of sensational, breathtaking views, like they enjoy, say, in Stellenbosch, in South Africa, nor do we have a wine route seemingly designed for wine tourism, like in California’s Napa Valley.

We do, however, have a wine industry that connects the Land of Israel and the people of Israel from the very beginnings of the Jewish people until today, from Biblical times until the start-up Israel of the 21st century. I always say it is possible to view Israel through the prism of its wines, wineries and vineyards. Through wine, one may experience and learn about agriculture, archaeology, gastronomy, history, technology, peoplehood and religion.

When I first arrived in Israel, wine tourism was a visit to the Carmel Winery at Rishon Lezion or Zichron Ya’acov. School children and soldiers used to go on a winery tour in their tens of thousands, and leave clutching a mini-bottle of grape juice or Kiddush wine.

Since those early days, I personally have made a career of selling Israel through its wine. I was proud to be working at the Golan Heights Winery when they became the first winery to take tourism seriously. They were the pioneering winery in so many ways, but also in wine tourism. They were the first to understand it was important and that a visitors’ center was an integral part of a winery. They realized a wine tour had to be part entertainment, informative and educational. They were also the first here to understand the importance of holding wine events and connecting wine with gastronomy. Later, when they founded the Galil Mountain Winery, it was designed with the tourist in mind.

More specifically, I worked in wine tourism when creating the Center for Wine & Culture at Carmel’s Zichron Ya’acov Winery. It was created to be an innovative fusion of wine education and wine tourism. Unfortunately, though the name has endured, the lofty vision has not.

I SUPPOSE the two leading pioneers in wine tourism in Israel are Assaf Winery and Tishbi Winery. Assaf Winery, at Kidmat Zvi on the Golan Heights, is part of the Kedem Wine Village, which has quality guest cabins, a spa, a restaurant-café and winery. Everything is run and managed by the Kedem family. It was founded by Assaf Kedem, wine grower, winemaker and winery owner, who had a vision and encouraged his family to follow and participate.

Tishbi Winery was founded by Yonatan Tishbi, a fifth-generation wine grower. His son, Golan, is now the winemaker and with his greater involvement, the food side further developed. He brought in a well-known international chef for the restaurant, began to represent one of the best prestige chocolate producers, initiated chocolate and wine tastings and also installed a bakery, a pizza oven and a hickory-smoke oven. This is a winery where wine is just one of the products available. They also sell jams and preserves, olive oil and honey produced by his sister, and ceramics crafted by his wife. Both Assaf Winery and Tishbi Winery are great models.

In fact, many wineries offer food, some offer a film, and there are others that have their own unique selling points. However, when I recently went to Tuscany and Portugal, I saw that every winery had a restaurant and most had accommodations.

We have so far to go. Sometimes when I look at some of the Internet sites or English texts of Israel wineries in catalogs and their preparedness to present themselves internationally, I despair.

The marketing wine regions or routes tend to be very Israel-centric. We have three main established wine routes as I see it. Firstly, the North, which includes the Galilee and Golan Heights, then what I call the northern coast in the Mount Carmel, Zichron region, and finally, the Judean Foothills and Judean Hills in the center of the country. To these I swiftly add the Central Mountains, running down the spine of the country and the Negev, which have developed quickly, particularly since the turn of the millennium.

However, I recently met one of the new young Turks of Israeli wine who was far more optimistic and chided me for my disparaging comments. Guy Haran is



ASSAF WINE lovers enjoying a glass at Assaf Winery's Kedem Wine Village. (Assaf Winery)

TOP: THE visitors center of the Golan Heights Winery, pioneer of wine tourism in Israel. (Golan Heights Winery)

BOTTOM: HARAN organizes wine tours around the world. (Courtesy)

slim, young and tall with a mop of ginger hair. He is usually standing at events, quiet and slightly aloof, even shy-looking, with his characteristic lopsided smile. However, underneath the cool exterior, there is a steely countenance; he is someone who knows exactly what he wants. He has a well-attuned international outlook and pays careful attention to detail, rather than being a provincial Israeli.

Haran has chosen wine tourism as the aspect of the wine industry on which he is going to focus. He believes we should be more proactive, stop moaning and start building. "It is up to us to take responsibility. It is all in our hands," he told me.

It was refreshing to hear someone with this outlook. He believes tourism is important for the country and that wine tourism is essential for the wineries. He is certainly right about that. He explained: "Export and wine tourism are two sides of the same coin." He believes tourism, incoming and local, is the key to increasing sales and consumption, and to marketing Israel as a quality wine-producing country.

HE EMPHASIZES that we have a great country and we need to learn to show it at its best. He provides an active consulting service for local wineries, regional councils and wine regions to learn how to gear up for the 21st century in marketing and wine tourism. Not only does he know what needs to be done, but he is particularly keen to justify it by showing how this can be financially beneficial for them, too.

His international experience gives him a perspective that only boosts his credibility. Haran is founder and CEO of Vinspiration, a company that deals with wine and culinary tourism. For wine tourists, he offers assistance on any level. This can range from giving advice on organizing a casual tour for a couple, family or group to planning every detail of a program for a large group.

He has a team of expert wine guides, each of them specialists in different regions. They cover all the classic regions in Italy, France, Spain and Portugal, as well as more exotic regions (wine wise) like England, Hungary and Slovenia. For Israelis traveling abroad, this is your address. However, for those abroad wishing to visit Israel, whether regular tourists, wine lovers or connoisseurs, Vinspiration will provide the same service to make a wine, culinary and gourmet visit as

successful as possible.

In a praiseworthy project, he took the managers of Israeli winery visitors' centers to Bordeaux, to illustrate to them how things may be approached differently. Education by example.

Furthermore, Haran represents Israel at international forums like Destination Vignobles, the International Wine Tourism Conference (IWINETC) and Must - Fermenting Ideas, an international wine conference. As an example of the respect with which he is viewed, Haran was invited to make a presentation at the IWINETC.

Haran has steadily built up his knowledge and experience over the last 10 years. He graduated to level three of the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET, the most famous wine school in the world) and is now studying for the diploma, an accomplishment achieved by only seven Israelis to date.

Previously, Haran was brand ambassador for Riedel in Israel, the Austrian company that is the top wine glass specialist. He was active at Ish Anavim (The Grape Man) organizing and managing international wine-tasting competitions, festivals, themed tastings and wine events. It was while there that he organized and led his first wine tours to the main wine regions of France, Spain and Italy.

ORIGINALLY, he started out his career anticipating becoming a lawyer, but after becoming a barman, Haran slipped into the drinks world. He opened the Jerusalem branch of Zman Amity, Israel's largest bartending school and, gradually wine took him over. He graduated to become the sommelier at the iconic King David Hotel, the 1868 Restaurant and was part of the founding team of chef Haim Cohen's Yaffo-Tel Aviv restaurant.

When circumstances permit, he is an educator. His teaching credentials reach back to his work at Zman Amity, continued at The Grape Man and he now lectures at IWSI, the Israel branch of the WSET.

So, in the hands of determined people of vision, like Haran, wine tourism may yet be the shining light of the Israeli wine industry in the future. Tel Aviv has already been branded as an 'Outstanding Culinary Destination' and Israel as one of the 'Top Wine Destinations' to visit. The Export Institute is running an excellent 'Wines of Israel' program in the US. Even the

Ministry of Tourism has made wine a key brand, which will be used to promote the country abroad. Let's pray that the tourism industry can swiftly recover when the current nightmare is over and that wine tourism will return even stronger than before.

As for Israel, in Haran's words: "The wine revolution is complete. The identity revolution is next, and wine tourism will play an integral part in this."

Let us hope we can get back to normal and make the great leap forward in wine tourism that we have made in wine quality in recent years. Guy Haran and others, it is in your hands... and we will help! ■

The writer, a wine industry veteran, has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years and is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com

