



# LIQUID GOLD



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Olive oil and wine are the exalted products produced from the humble olive and grape. They are symbols of ancient Israel as much as of the Start-Up Nation of today. The ancient Israelites and modern-day Israelis would have been equally familiar with the importance of olive oil and wine for both nourishment and trade.

The olive grove and vineyard have always been planted where the soils were too stony or infertile for other crops and fruit trees. In my eyes, to see a vineyard and an olive grove in close proximity is always a thing of great beauty. They are a compatible pair and go together like salt and pepper or tehina and hummus.

The *Book of Deuteronomy* refers to “a land of olive oil and wine.” Both are among the Seven Species. In fact, the vine and the olive tree are symbols not just of Israel but of the Mediterranean region as a whole. Greek historian Thucydides wrote in the 5th century BCE that man became civilized when he began to cultivate the olive tree and the vine.

Olive oil is a unique product. It is made by Jews, Arabs, Druze, and Circassians and is thus a symbol of the melting pot that makes up modern Israel. The Palestinians have always made olive oil as an integral part of their lifestyle. Israelis used olive oil sparsely when I first came to Israel.

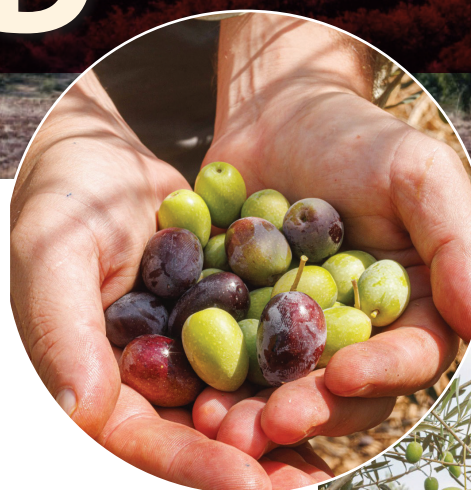
Those who wanted what they thought was authentic olive oil would buy it in plastic bottles from Arab vendors by the side of the road. What they received was green and aromatic, with a pronounced bitterness. The olive oil revolution occurred here at the same time that Israelis learned about artisan bread and homemade cheeses. These successes were fanned by the new trend of the Mediterranean diet. Israelis started to appreciate high-quality olive oil.

The problem is that demand here outstrips production. The big brands sold in supermarkets sell in volumes that make it likely they have to use imported olive oil and, in repeated tastings or consumer checks, the quality can be wanting. The boutique producer, who grows his own fruit and has a presence at the olive press, is where the quality olive oils may be found.

PTORA'S VINES and olive groves are situated in the Lachish region.

(Photos: Ptora)

THE PRECIOUS olive fruit from which one receives liquid gold.



SHMUEL TAMIR, who managed to escape Germany just before the onset of World War II, settled in what was then a barren part of southern Israel. In 1956, he decided to focus on agriculture. In those days, it was a Zionist thing to work the land and make it your own.

He planted his first olive trees in 1976 in Lachish. The variety he used was Nabali, one that is indigenous to the Holy Land. Its name suggests that it may hail from Nablus. During Tamir's time, he established agriculture in the region and was a pioneer; he fulfilled his dream of working the land and being in tune with nature.

HIS SON, Noam, continued his father's legacy. He expanded the farm, putting roots deeper into agriculture. However, he was aware that the next generation was turning their backs on agriculture. I know of families who grew wine grapes for five generations, suddenly finding that the youngsters were no longer interested.

It was a hard life. Support was sparse, and the vagaries of nature exposed them to tough financial times. It was a downward spiral that was not getting easier. The younger generation wanted to make money and did not want to work as hard and for as little [reward] as their parents did. Noam jokingly suggested to his son, Ido, that the best days for the agriculturist had passed. He wished for his son an easier life and more success financially.

Ido, Tamir's grandson, left the nest to spread his wings and broaden his outlook outside the confines of the family firm. Among other things, he studied at Shenkar College and worked in hi-tech. But the legacy of his grandfather was deep inside him, even if he did not immediately realize it. When his time came and he was needed to run the family firm, he rallied to the call. However, he understood that “root” canal treatment was required. There was no room for “also-rans” in agriculture; there was no point in following the



IDO TAMIR, owner of Ptora Farm, producing olive oils and gourmet products.

herd. They had to pursue excellence and be – and be seen to be – the best.

So when he took over the Tamir Family Farm, he overhauled everything – from the tree to the bottle. He brought in modern technology that he aligned with the traditional farming methods of his family. He then created the Ptora brand, which became one of the finest Israeli boutique olive oil producers.

He arrived at the name Ptora almost by accident. When work was being done on Highway 6 (the Yitzhak Rabin Highway), they excavated an area they found under olive trees owned by his family. Archaeologists discovered the remains of an ancient Byzantine town called Ptora.

Most exciting for me is that they found an ancient wine press there. This was not a surprise: There was



an enormous wine industry, but it was Byzantine, not Jewish. What made this special was that they also found a *mikveh* (Jewish ritual bath), which was evidence that it was a Jewish community. The result of this happy accident was that they lost an olive grove but gained a name for their brand.

Ido Tamir took over 40 hectares (100 acres) of olive groves growing seven different varieties. He grew his olive trees sustainably, without the need for fertilizers or pesticides. He took control of every aspect of agriculture, deciding to only produce from the groves where he was involved in every detail. He decided to harvest earlier than most of the olive growers, and he took extra care to control every aspect from the time the olives arrived at the olive press. Attention to detail became more than a slogan.

Then, using marketing experience gained in hi-tech and branding skills he learned at Shenkar, he created the Ptor brand. The black packaging, logo, and font are striking and immediately noticeable on the shelves. Ptor immediately became associated not just with quality but with the highest quality. There was no doubt Ptor looked the part.

BUT APPEARANCE is never enough. The product has to be good, and the quality outstanding. If not, it would be lost in the mass of mediocrity. He started visiting the leading chefs in the country and some of the most famous restaurants. With their resulting interest in his products, he knew the quality was first class. What's more, the culinary industry heard this on the grapevine, and Ptor became the experts' choice. Nothing succeeds like success.

But it was not enough. So Ido Tamir started sending his olive oils to the leading competitions all over the world. I know from experience that many of the most successful wine brands were created abroad, not in Israel. It was international third party recognition that helped build the likes of Yarden, Castel, and Yatir. But there was no certainty that the world, awash with quality olive oil from the likes of Spain, Italy, and Greece, would pay attention to an unknown company representing a tiny industry in a country barely visible on a map.

However, apparently Tamir's olive oils were not just good but very good. They won awards in the leading competitions in the world from New York to Japan, and also in the home turf of the giants in Europe. Third party recognition at the very highest level gave Tamir confidence that he was on the right track. It gave the company the impetus to continue to invest in quality, and the Israeli consumer realized Ptor was in the fore-

front of quality in Israel.

Perhaps the best and most moving award was winning a prestigious Gold Medal at the World Olive Oil Competition recently with his flagship Nabali Limited Edition. This was the variety his father had planted so many years earlier.

For Ido Tamir, though, it was still not enough. He is a perfectionist, who always wants to learn more. Already among the leading tasting experts in Israel, he chose to sharpen his skills and became a certified olive oil taster for the International Olive Council (IOC). He knows what a quality olive oil tastes like, and he was invited to be a judge in some of those international competitions, where previously he felt like an outsider looking in.

The Tamir Family Farm is situated in Moshav Sde Moshe, just east of Kiryat Gat, in the Lachish region. Tel Lachish was a Canaanite city, so the history is long and fascinating. Lachish is part of the Judea Wine Region according to the new wine map drawn up by IPEVO, the official body of winemakers and viticulturists. It is sandwiched between the Judean Foothills and the Northern Negev.

The family also has vineyards growing Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Shiraz, and Chardonnay. They started making prize-winning wine in 2006, using the services of Ya'acov Oryah among others. Their wines were also branded Ptor but are now simply called Cantina 27, the number of their farm. They also market local honeys, especially made for them, and a



THE HARVEST of Ptor's olive groves, known as the 'masik.'

PTORA'S GIFT packs include olive oil, wine, spreads, and honey. (Haim Yosef)

KEEP YOUR finest olive oil for drizzling onto salads.

range of jams, infusions, spices, and herbs. The only criteria is that they have to be as natural as possible, of the highest quality, and be locally produced. The jams and spreads are produced from home recipes by locals, and the fruits and vegetables and spices are also grown locally. As such, they represent the produce of the Lachish region. The Tamir Farm store offers artisan products grown and made by the locals. They utilize all these products in high quality, gourmet gift packs at different price points. Up to date with trends, they also have a full range of vegan products. I have a son who is vegan, so I appreciate this focus – and he will appreciate it more than me.

IDO TAMIR and Ptor do not believe in standing still. The latest new initiative is an Ultra Premium Olive Oil called Midnight. Only from the finest plots grown by Tamir, the olives are meticulously selected and harvested (using the milking technique) and pressed and produced at night, so the pickers use head lamps. Temperatures are naturally low, and the extraction is as gentle as can be. The result is a sublime, rare and unique olive oil for connoisseurs and foodies. They work from 9 p.m. to 2:30 in the morning. After 24 hours, the olive oil is filtered, and 48 hours later it will be bottled.

They produce a Midnight expression from three varieties and a blend. These are the perfect gift for the olive oil expert who thinks he has tasted everything. Though Midnight is top of the range, they also produce a range of different varieties at different price points, including two- and five-liter containers, and a special tasters' gift pack of six different olive oils in smaller bottles.

Ido Tamir has been loyal to the roots built by his grandfather and father. He has stood on their shoulders and brought the business into the 21st century. Ptor is representing Israeli olive oil with great flair, and no little success. Next time you drizzle an olive oil onto your salad, make it a good one. ■

*Adam Montefiore is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer. He has advanced Israeli wine for 38 years and is known as the 'English voice of Israeli wine.'*  
www.adammontefiore.com