

THE HIGHLANDS OF ISRAEL



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The boutique winery revolution began quietly enough in 1988 with the formation of Meron Winery. It took a more substantial step when Margalit Winery came on the scene in 1989. These are often referred to as the first boutique wineries. However, what was new was the term “boutique.”

There have been small domestic wineries in Jewish communities forever, and in the mid-19th century, before Carmel, there were many, particularly in Jerusalem. The reason only two are remembered (Shor and Teperberg) is that they were the only ones to survive.

However, undoubtedly in the 1990s a boutique winery boom began, led either by growers, who decided to reserve some of their fruit for their own use, or hobby wine-makers, who decided to take it all a little more seriously. This boom shows no sign of abating even now.

In the early 2000s, the artisan drinks movement spread to breweries. In the face of two enormous powerhouses in Israel, Tempo (Goldstar and Heineken) and IBBL (Carlsberg), a number of home brewers took the step to become commercial, but on a tiny scale. The first was David Cohen with the great-named Dancing Camel Brewery, founded in 2005. Since then there has been a rush of new micro-breweries which have contrived to make the beer scene more lively and interesting.

In the more recent past, there has been a move to artisanal distilleries producing spirits. Yuval Hargil, known to everyone as Joov, started experimenting with distillation in the early 2000s. He is well respected in the food and wine scene as someone with deep insights, and for a while he was the food critic of *Time Out*. In 2008 he established the Julius Craft Distillery in the Western Galilee, in honor of Dan Julius Yoeli, the person who first instilled the passion in him. He prides himself in using local Galilee ingredients.

The Pelter Distillery is another boutique venture created in 2013 alongside the successful Pelter Winery, in the Golan Heights. It is a joint venture between the Pelter brothers, Nir and Tal, and drinks experts Yossi Buznah and Tal Hotiner. They purchased a cognac still and have produced a range of “handmade” (in their words) products using ingredients such as Pink Lady apples, wine grapes and Medjool dates.

Both Joov and Tal Pelter are imbued with the tinkering curiosity essential for the craft, an urge to play and the passion to explore. They are passionate about ingredients and dogmatic about the quality of alcohol. As a result the Israeli consumer is getting a range of spirits that take Israel far from the commercial cheap and uninspiring spirits once produced by the larger wineries. The Marc de Galilee and Pelter Pink Lady Gin are fine examples of their distilling skills.

Then came David Zibel, who is determined to make

Israeli whiskey. He is a former real estate agent, born in France and raised in Canada. He has set his sights on producing whiskey and founded the Golan Heights Distillery in 2014.

You would be forgiven for thinking there are only five countries producing whiskey: the US, Canada, Ireland, Scotland and Japan. They dominate the sales and publicity of this most celebrated of spirits. In fact, there are a surprising number of countries that try to emulate the big five. Apart from Japan, the most successful place to break into the brotherhood is Taiwan. Their Kavalan Whiskey has won some incredible awards based on blind tastings, which gives hope to Israel, because Taiwan is also hot and humid and an unlikely place to fly high in the whiskey stakes.

However, the big daddy of the new distillers is the Milk & Honey Distillery, which is situated on the border between south Tel Aviv and Jaffa. This has been developed on a more commercial basis than the others. Its target is to produce 700 barrels a year.

It has launched the first-ever authentic Israeli whiskey. The barrel was distilled in January 2014 at a kibbutz in the Sharon Plain by head distiller Tomer Goren, using the expertise of the whiskey guru Dr. Jim Swan. Swan was considered one of the main experts in whiskey from hot countries. He was also involved in the award-winning Kavalan from Taiwan.

The heat of Israel has two basic effects. Firstly, the loss to evaporation, known enchantingly as the angel's share, can be as much as 8%-10%. In Scotland the loss is 2%-4%. Lucky angels. It is obviously better to be an angel in Israel than elsewhere! Secondly, the maturation process is speeded up, and a whiskey may gain attributes of age and complexity faster than in a cooler climate.

The M&H whiskey has been aged for two-and-a-half years in a new American oak cask and then for seven months in a used Bourbon cask. I was fortunate enough to taste it. It has a great whiskey nose, but the taste is less advanced than you would expect. However, it is a fine aperitif whiskey and, no doubt, a very historic bottle for collectors and whiskey mavens because of its rarity and uniqueness. There are only 391 bottles produced, and the bottles will retail for NIS 449. The base product of the next whiskey currently aging in cask shows more promise. This is not a company going backward in any way.

Since then, Pelter has also released its own Israeli whiskey, though I have not yet had the opportunity to compare it with the M&H expression. It produced 1,000 bottles, and the whiskey was aged for 36 months in Bourbon and ex-wine casks.

Jews worldwide have a passion for whiskey that is difficult to explain. Visit Kiddush clubs in America or a kiddush here, and the hosts will probably take more trouble choosing the right whiskey than the correct wine. Milk & Honey provides something totally original: a kosher malt whiskey produced in the Land of Israel.

Most whiskey is not certified as kosher, but religious Jews have no problem with this, and it becomes an issue only if it is aged in sherry casks. It has been called “safe *treif*.” A few years ago I engineered the production of two Bruichladdich whiskeys (1989 and 1994) aged in wine barrels used by Carmel Winery. The results were outstanding, but despite the Israeli connection, it was not certified as kosher.

However, Israel's first whiskey is certified by the Tel Aviv Rabbinat. The distillery is committed to offering a kosher product. It does not work on Shabbat or holidays. It is very strict about the kosher certification of the products and ingredients.

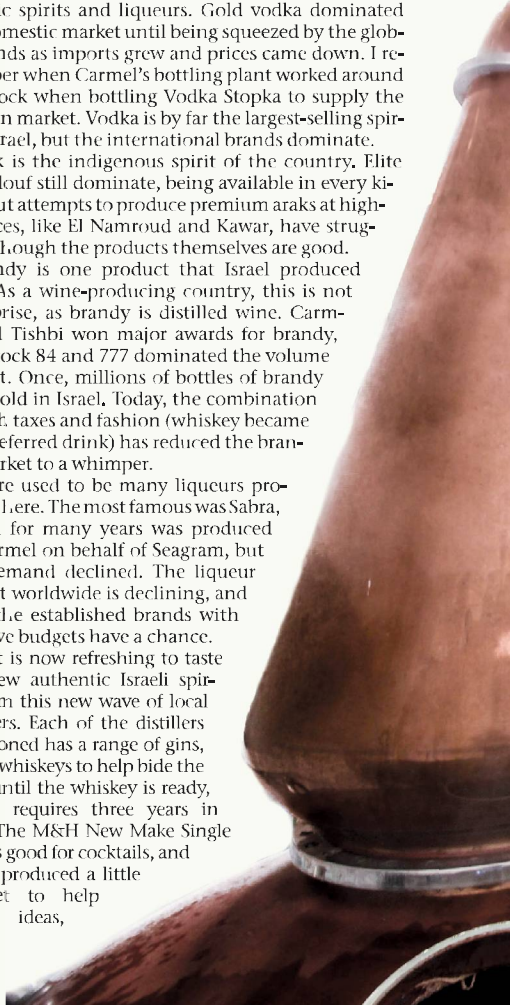
Israeli spirits were never top-rate, though it was not so long ago that most large wineries also produced alcoholic spirits and liqueurs. Gold vodka dominated the domestic market until being squeezed by the global brands as imports grew and prices came down. I remember when Carmel's bottling plant worked around the clock when bottling Vodka Stopka to supply the Russian market. Vodka is by far the largest-selling spirit in Israel, but the international brands dominate.

Arak is the indigenous spirit of the country. Elite and Alouf still dominate, being available in every kiosk, but attempts to produce premium araks at higher prices, like El Namroud and Kavar, have struggled, though the products themselves are good.

Brandy is one product that Israel produced well. As a wine-producing country, this is not a surprise, as brandy is distilled wine. Carmel and Tishbi won major awards for brandy, and Stock 84 and 777 dominated the volume market. Once, millions of bottles of brandy were sold in Israel. Today, the combination of high taxes and fashion (whiskey became the preferred drink) has reduced the brandy market to a whimper.

There used to be many liqueurs produced here. The most famous was Sabra, which for many years was produced by Carmel on behalf of Seagram, but the demand declined. The liqueur market worldwide is declining, and only the established brands with massive budgets have a chance.

So it is now refreshing to taste the new authentic Israeli spirits from this new wave of local distillers. Each of the distillers mentioned has a range of gins, white whiskeys to help bide the time until the whiskey is ready, which requires three years in cask. The M&H New Make Single Malt is good for cocktails, and it has produced a little booklet to help with ideas,



and its Levantine Gin is slightly herbaceous, fruity with a citrusy overlay.

There are also new places for the whiskey fanatic and interested tourist to visit. You don't have to visit the Highlands of Scotland. Tel Aviv will suffice. The Milk and Honey Distillery has a visitors' center, and then there is the Whiskey Bar & Museum situated in a historic Templar cellar in the Saron neighborhood. My experience at the distillery was first class and I thoroughly recommend it (but be sure to book in advance), but I was not so fortunate in a very brief visit to the Bar & Museum, but the place is impressive nonetheless.

Anyway, Israeli whiskey is here! Let's raise a glass and say "Sláinte" (L'haim) to the new artisan distillery scene and especially to Israel's first authentic whiskey. It certainly whets the appetite for the next batches currently aging in cask. ■

The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is known as "the English voice of Israeli wine." www.adammontefiore.com



A POT STILL distilling whiskey at the Milk and Honey Distillery, which is situated on the border between south Tel Aviv and Jaffa. (Courtesy)

(ABOVE) Milk & Honey's Single Malt. (Courtesy)

THE BARREL room at the Milk and Honey Distillery, where whiskey matures in casks for a minimum of three years. (Courtesy)