

70 YEARS OF ISRAELI WINE!



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Seventy years of the State of Israel and 70 years of Israeli wine. This has included 35 years of wine mediocrity and 35 years of exciting development.

We went from a time when Alicante was the most planted grape variety, in the 1950s, to four decades of dominance by Carignan, until today, when Cabernet Sauvignon is the most planted variety.

When the State of Israel was founded, over 90% of our vineyards were planted in the coastal regions, including the valleys surrounding the southern Mount Carmel and the central plain, the Judean plain and Judean foothills. Now the vineyard concentration has moved northward to the Galilee and Golan and eastward to the Judean Hills rising toward Jerusalem.

I will attempt to divide our wine story into decades and select a wine and the person that best represent the time.

IN THE 1950s most of the wine drunk was sweet, and it was only something to be imbibed in a religious context. The wine that symbolizes the era for me is Palwin No. 10. Pre-state Palwin was a brand across the range. By the 1950s it was a kiddush wine only, and it was the largest export of the time. It was a wine originally marketed for the British by the Palestine Wine & Trading Company, founded in 1898. Each wine was identified by a number. It is Israel's oldest wine brand and reminds me of the time sweet wine was king.

An influential wine person of this era was Shimon P. Rosenthal, the winemaker of Rishon Wine Cellars, then by far the largest winery. He was German-born,

studied wine at Geisenheim, escaped Germany before Kristallnacht, and was the figure who created the infrastructure and systems for Rishon to dominate the next 50 years of Israeli wine in terms of the production of large quantities of wine, grape juice and brandy, as well as numerous liqueurs.

However, my man of the decade was James Rothschild, son of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, who generously donated the wineries of Rishon Lezion & Zichron Ya'acov to Carmel Mizrahi.

The Sixties were dominated by the rise of semi-dry wines. Carmel Mizrahi was in its prime, and the legendary managing director was Elyakum Ostashinsky, who trod the wine trade with grace and style. Then the Wine Growers Cooperative had over 70% of the market. Rishon Lezion and Zichron Ya'acov cellars were the only large wineries in Israel. There were two medium-size wineries, Eliaz and Friedman Tnuva, and about 10 small wineries, including Efrat, Hacommim, Shor, Carmei Zion.

It should be recalled that in those days an atmosphere of austerity ruled. There was no food and wine marketing or pretension to quality. There was no branding. Carmel concentrated on production and distribution, and export was with the holy objective of enabling Jews in far-off communities to make kiddush.

Carmel Hock was the largest-selling wine. This was the wine that represents the decade. Old-timers may remember their parents drinking hock as a spritzer, with soda water added. Adom Atic, an off-dry red wine, was the most visible Israeli wine in export markets, particularly popular in Scandinavia. At the end of the Sixties, the first-ever varietals were made. These are wines named after the main grape variety. There was a dry Sauvignon Blanc, semi-dry Semillon, Cabernet Sauvi-



gnon and semi-dry Grenache Rosé.

The Seventies contained the roots of the wine revolution. Prof. Cornelius Ough of the University of California at Davis, visiting the Golan Heights, noticed the high elevation and volcanic soil. He expressed the opinion that this would be good wine-growing country. In 1976 the first vineyards were planted on the Golan.

Also, in 1976, Freddie Stiller, by now chief winemaker of Carmel Mizrahi, decided he wanted to age his prestige red wine in small oak barrels. However, there was no budget for small oak barrels for wine. The winery was a big producer of brandy, and he was permitted to purchase Limousin oak barrels for maturing the fiery spirit. In a mischievous throwing of the dice, he decided to put aside some of these to age his precious wine.

The result was the Carmel Cabernet Sauvignon Special Reserve 1976, which, believe it or not, was produced from Rishon Lezion vineyards. This was Israel's first international-style wine aged in small oak barrels, and it went on to surprise over the next 20 years.

Stiller and his Special Reserve wine were the man and wine of the decade. The largest-selling wine of the period was Grenache Rosé.

The 1980s heralded the founding of the Golan Heights Winery. The mischievous, creative and dynamic CEO Shimshon Welner took on the staid, conservative wine establishment with this new quality-driven winery.

He decided to import expertise, appointing Peter Stern, a Californian wine consultant, who simply brought New World wine technology to Israel. For the first time the decision-making in the vineyard of how to prune and when to harvest passed from the grower to the winery, and the series of young graduates from

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ELYAKUM OSTASHINSKI of Carmel Mizrahi (right) with David Ben-Gurion. Ostashinski was CEO when Carmel dominated Israeli wines. (Courtesy)

- 1 Carmel Special Reserve (1976)
- 2 Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon (1985)
- 3 Margalit Cabernet Sauvignon (1993)
- 4 Castel Grand Vin (2006)
- 5 Tzora Shoresh Blanc (2013)

(Courtesy)



(FROM LEFT): Freddie Stiller of Carmel Mizrahi, who produced Israel's first international style wine; Eli Ben Zaken of Domaine du Castel. Castel brought style and quality to Israel; Eran Pick, MW of Tzora Vineyards, Israel's first Master of Wine. (Courtesy)

UC Davis that Stern brought over started making wine in the vineyard and using state-of-the-art technology at the winery. He was the most influential figure of the Eighties, because, encouraged and enabled by Welner, he ushered in the Israeli wine revolution.

The wine of the 1980s is easy. It was Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1985. The 1984 won the gold medal and trophy at the IWSC in London, then an astonishing result, and then the 1985 won three gold medals, which we might sneeze at today. Then it was exciting and unheard of. It was a wonderful wine with great depth and concentration. The Israel wine revolution was under way.

Shepherded by Victor Schoenfeld, winemaker since 1992, the Golan Heights Winery still represents the cutting edge of Israeli wine technology, and Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon is still today arguably the leading ambassador internationally.

In the 1989, when I made aliya, there were just seven commercial wineries: Carmel Mizrahi, Barkan, Golan Heights, Efrat, Eliaz, Carmei Zion-Askalon and Baron. There were also the Shor family wineries and the monasteries. *C'est tout*.

The 1990s was the beginning of the boutique winery revolution. This was fueled by growers such as Yonatan Tishbi and Ronnie James, and hobbyists – such as Dr. Yair Margalit and Eli Ben Zaken – turning into winemakers.

The person I have chosen to symbolize the 1990s is Margalit. He founded the first quality boutique winery, Margalit Winery, acted as a consultant to other start-up wineries, wrote winemaking education books that became professional textbooks worldwide, and was at the forefront of wine education at Tel Hai College and Haifa's Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. He sym-

bolized the boutique wine revolution that swept Israel.

Yarden Katzrin 1990 was the first deluxe prestige icon wine, but the wine that summed up the decade for me was the Margalit Cabernet Sauvignon 1993, which showed that the boutique wineries could really make world-class wines. It was a tour de force. The largest-selling wine by far was Selected Emerald Riesling.

At the turn of the century, with the rise of the boutique winery, the large wineries fought back. Wineries that concentrated on liquid religion – that is, kiddush wine and grape juice – started focusing on table wine. When I arrived in Israel, all the major wineries except the Golan Heights Winery produced spirits, too. As the gates of importation opened, this declined sharply, and the focus turned to wines. Names were changed. Carmel Mizrahi, Efrat, Eliaz, Askalon, Baron became Carmel Winery, Teperberg, Binyamina, Segal and Tishbi, respectively.

In the 2000s, Israeli wine first started receiving international recognition. The person who symbolized this for me was Eli Ben Zaken of Domaine du Castel. The winery set the standards of style and quality in Israel, and they were the pioneers of the Judean Hills. In addition, the family twice built the most beautiful winery in Israel!

My wine of the decade was the complex, supple Castel Grand Vin 2006. It both received the highest score for an Israeli wine from *Robert Parker's Wine Advocate* and contributed significantly to Castel becoming the first Israeli winery to get the maximum four stars in *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book*. As Parker and Johnson are, respectively, the most important wine critic and wine writer in the world, it was important recognition for Israel, at the highest possible level.

The largest-selling wine was Yarden Mount Hermon

Red, which symbolized the move in the market to red wines. Gato Negro from Chile was the biggest import.

The person who I think represents the seventh decade of Israeli wine is Eran Pick MW, the winemaker of Tzora Vineyards. He is leading what is the next revolution in Israeli wine, the search for Israeli identity and the desire to express *terroir*. He became Israel's first-ever Master of Wine, which has already contributed to opening doors and advancing Israeli wines in the world.

As for the wine of the decade, it is still early days, but I choose the Tzora Shoresh Blanc 2013, a mineral, characterful Sauvignon Blanc of such intensity, it is hard to reconcile the fact that it was made in Israel. It represented the extraordinary advances Israel has made in making white wines in recent years. The largest-selling wine is still Hermon Red, and the largest-selling imported wine is Blue Nun, a phenomenon in Israel.

ISRAELI WINE has received 94 points in *Robert Parker's Wine Advocate*, four stars in *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book*, and had a cover story in *Wine Spectator*.

Wine represents modern Israel, both the land and the people, and connects us by a thread to ancient Israel, biblical times and the roots of the Jewish people, where wine was also crucial to the lifestyle and economy.

The growers and viticulturists who grow it, winemakers and wineries who make it, and sommeliers, restaurateurs and wine retailers who sell it, should take a bow. I salute you! Onward and upward!

The writer has advanced Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adanmontefiore.com