



MARTIN SINKOFF flanked by the Flam brothers, Gilad and Golan, at their beautiful eponymous winery. (Photos: Courtesy Martin Sinkoff)

# FROM CHOCOLATE BAGUETTES TO A WORLD OF WINE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**H**e is a big shot, but you would not know it. He can be seen at tastings, a slight figure, usually stooped as though he does not want to stand out from the crowd. He can be identified by a brightly colored waistcoat, or a colored scarf thrown casually over his shoulders, whatever the weather.

He has come to live in Israel, but has not yet adopted the Israeli character. He does not in booming voice delight in saying who he knows or has met, nor does he take any opportunity to illustrate what he knows. However, he is a new import to Israel, who deserves respect and what he has to say is worth hearing.

Martin Sinkoff fell in love with France when he was a boy. Sent by his parents there at the age of 14, he learned French and became an instant Francophile. He loved the food, the aromas and the culture, which sat up and begged him to take notice. It was for him a kind of paradise. If he could summarize this in a mem-

ory, it would be eating crusty, warm baguettes bought from homemade bakeries on the beach, stuffed with melted chocolate. Original and evocative!

The Sinkoffs hailed from a Polish Galician town, named Sinkoff of course, at the beginning of the 20th century. His parents were respectively second and third generation Americans. Martin was a cultured fellow. Literature was his thing. Studying with a brilliant professor at university was a blessing, with a huge added extra; the professor introduced the young Sinkoff to wine.

At the earliest opportunity, on his year off, he was back in France teaching English. A book called *The International Album of Wine* caught his attention. He was hooked. It was by Stephen Schneider, an American négociant living Bordeaux who became his mentor and friend. A career in wine beckoned.

He began his career working in New York for Morell & Co, still a major presence on the wine scene. In 1979 he had the opportunity of a lifetime, to work with Alexis Lichine, the famous wine personality and owner of Château Prieure-Lichine in Margaux, Bordeaux. His job was to be Lichine's assistant and to translate his

*Encyclopedia of Wine*.

Lichine was one of the great characters of the wine trade. Sinkoff remembers, "He was an absolute force of nature." Furthermore, Lichine's book was, at the time, the book to have by your side. I can vouch for that. When I started in the wine trade, it became my permanent companion. The name also struck a chord with me. When I organized my first wine waiter competitions in the UK, Alexis Lichine et Cie, the company, was the sponsor. This concept later developed into "Pras Yarden" – the Yarden Award for Wine Service. It still remains the major wine service competition in Israel.

After this dream beginning, Sinkoff was perfectly placed to get a real job. He became fine wine director of Glazer's Wholesale, then based in Texas. This company has become one of the giants of the drinks industry, and is in partnership with Southern Wines & Spirits. The joint company, headquartered in Miami, Florida, is by far the largest wine and spirits distributor in the United States.

THERE, SINKOFF received crucial national experience outside the crucible of New York. His task, which suit-



TWO FLAGSHIP wines of Bordeaux (from left): Chateau Mouton Rothschild and Chateau Lafite Rothschild.



He admits to moments of frustration, the sort of polite understatement that anyone who has made aliyah will identify with. As far as the wine trade is concerned, there is always a danger that the quiet person will be ignored by the noisy, self-important wine intelligentsia who believe, because they are a big fish in a small pool, that they understand everything and have nothing to learn. Of course, he who knows only Israeli wine knows nothing. One only realizes how small and insignificant Israel is in the world of wine when you see

Uruguay and Brazil with larger stands at international exhibitions.

MARTIN BELIEVES Israeli wine is at a formative moment. The improvements in wine quality he can literally decipher year by year. He admires the innovation and says "I have complete admiration for what is happening here." He clearly believes Israel has as much to say as Greece, and certainly more than Georgia, which is receiving a great deal of focus at present.

He believes Israel's size, small volumes and relatively high prices actually work in its favor, because it will not be sucked into a downward spiral of discounts in the mass market, as happened with Australia, or set itself too low a bar, as occurred with Chilean wine. To build the Israel brand, he says, we must have a two-pronged marketing strategy to target, on one hand, restaurants and on-premise markets, and on the other, wine journalists and critics.

Martin Sinkoff Associates is his current consultancy business. He runs it from Tel Aviv with his associate, the very well-respected and well-known Master of Wine, Roger C. Boehmrich, who is resident in New York. He offers services of how to navigate the complicated American market, which comprises nearly 60% of Israeli exports.

He helps wineries find importers and advises how to sell outside the kosher market, which is a benefit, (where would we be without it?), but also a millstone, because it stifles the Israeli brand into a kosher box. Interestingly, he believes we sell kosher all wrong. He thinks kosher should be marketed as an added benefit, like organic wine or sustainable vineyards, but should

not be allowed to become the identity of the wine.

His own specialist interest is Bordeaux. This is the most famous wine region in the world, which is largely ignored in Israel apart from rich collectors looking for status or quality that only money can buy. Under the surface, he sees a wealth of quality wines that are good value, fantastic finds and would be snapped up by restaurants which don't have the wherewithal to find the gems. Martin Sinkoff does, and we can expect and hope for some interesting imports, when the restaurants are ready to receive them.

I asked him to recommend some Israeli wines that he particularly likes. He was reluctant because, as a gentleman, he does not want to offend new friends. I for one was interested in his opinion, so I squeezed it out of him.

He mentioned Sphera Riesling, Vitkin Grenache Blanc, Lahat White as white wines. He loved the Castel Rose 2019. Amongst reds he singled out Tzora's Judean Hills Red, Covenant Syrah and Flam Noble. In the value for money category of lesser expensive wines, he also picked out Dalton's Knan Red.

When I first made aliyah, I came from a place where I was dealing with wines from all over the world. I experienced two kinds of responses. The Israelo-centric primitives, who knew everything, looked down on me with resentment, with the view, "What does he know? He does not even speak Hebrew properly."

The other response was, "Great, someone of real experience. An opportunity for us. Let's engage."

I recall this only to sympathize with Martin Sinkoff if he encounters the former attitude. Those who are not provincial, but worldly and know wine outside the Israeli bubble, would be well advised to look past the quietness and modesty, and use his contacts, his expertise and experience.

Maybe we do not have chocolate-filled baguettes, and our French food is nothing to write home about. However, our humus and shakshuka is pretty good, and our Israeli Eastern Mediterranean fusion cuisine is making waves around the world. Martin Sinkoff, this is your new home. You are a wonderful addition to the Israeli wine scene. Welcome!

*The writer is a wine trade veteran, who has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*

ed him to a T, was to build them a fine wine portfolio from scratch. The Francophile morphed from a wine lover into an experienced wine trade professional, and built a network of contacts to last a lifetime. He also gained a good name for developing brands and wineries. Next stop was working as director of Val d'Orbieu Wines, the large but very successful cooperative in the Languedoc region of France.

He then formed Martin Sinkoff Wines. His name had value, his contacts and wine-wise dealings became well known in the jungle of the American wine market.

In 2001 he merged his company with Pasternak Wine Imports, whose brands were owned by none less than Domaine Barons de Rothschild (Lafite). His next stop was managing the wine business of William Grant, the whisky in the triangular bottle. His last stop before becoming totally independent was as director of marketing and fine wine at Frederick Wildman & Sons.

A great deal of kudos is due for a wine career of great value and his many achievements. In the complicated world of the USA wine trade, Sinkoff knows everyone and has touched all aspects of the business of wine. He is masterful in navigating the nightmare of doing business in different states. He lived in Manhattan and could be spotted weaving through the gridlocked roads on a Vespa scooter. He has always remained an arch and passionate Francophile, and what he does not know about Bordeaux is not worth knowing. In 2004 he was awarded the Ordre du Merite Agricole by the French government for his services to the French wine industry.

In 2016 he made a trip to scout out the Land in Israel. He describes himself as "a very observing, but not very observant Jew." Nevertheless, he was president of his local Conservative synagogue in America. He made aliyah in 2019.

Fortunately, on immigrating to Israel, he jettisoned the Vespa. To make aliyah from a familiar world to somewhere new is brave, but the image of the refined Sinkoff on a scooter, competing with the pumping testosterone of the Israeli driver, fills me with dread! Brave he is, but not foolhardy. At least coming to Tel Aviv was not such a surprise, traffic wise.



SINKOFF LEADS a tasting of Bordeaux wines at the Seren DPT wine venue in Jaffa.

Right: THE GENTLE smile hides Sinkoff's deep experience and great expertise.

