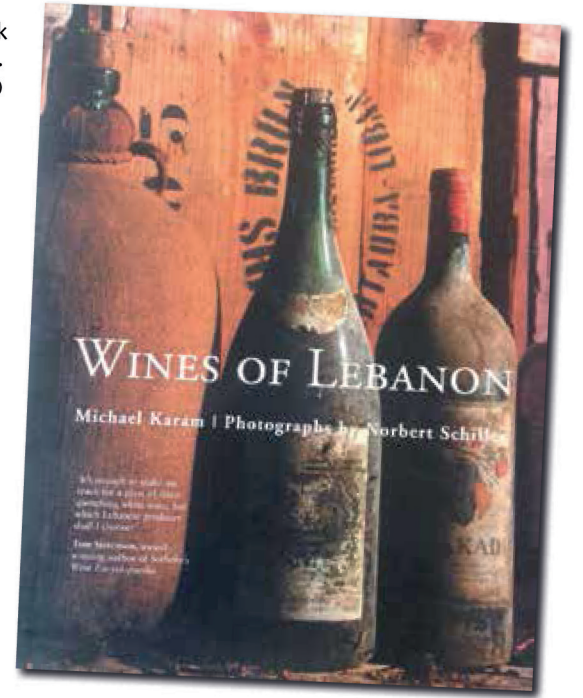




'WINES OF Lebanon,' the book that led to the film. (Photos: Michael Karam)



THE LEGEND and his wine. A young Serge Hochar of Chateau Musar (center), with wine writer Oz Clarke (left) and the writer. (Adam Montefiore)

WINE AND WAR



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

While Israel and Lebanon are connected by land, they are worlds apart politically, and clearly separated as though by a high wall of religion and war. Yet both countries share a history, even an ancient history when it comes to wine in the Levant.

I believe every Israeli should be interested in the wines of our neighboring countries. Most Israelis see themselves as the 51st state of America in aspiration while remaining deep in the morass of the Middle East in terms of politics. In sport we play as part of Europe, yet as far as wine is concerned, we more often than not find ourselves in a region called "kosher." However, kosher is not a country and Israel is not an island. The unavoidable truth is that we are part of the eastern Mediterranean of wine.

This really is a region divided by war and religion. The Turks and Greeks have fought on and off for 200 years; the Israelis and Palestinians for 100 years; the Israelis and Lebanese for 70 years; and Cyprus has been a divided country for 45 years. As if this is not enough, the recent civil war in Lebanon and the current one in Syria remind us that the enemy can often come from within. Yet this same Eastern Mediterranean gave wine culture to the world. A wine lover transported to the modern day from 2,000 years ago would be

quite familiar with the idea of high-quality wines from Greece, Israel and Lebanon.

When I was wine manager of a major UK hotel group in the late 1980s, I wanted to put onto the corporate wine list Château Musar and Yarden, the two wineries that heralded the wine revolution in their respective countries. I was captivated by the similarities in terroirs.

The vineyards in the Bekaa Valley and the Golan Heights are a mere 50 miles apart. That would fit comfortably inside almost any wine region in the world. Even the differences between these two wineries are totally complementary. Musar is the ultimate *laissez faire* winery, whereas Yarden is as up to date as tomorrow with advanced technology. The wine list was divided into regions, but neither Israel nor Lebanon was considered important enough to merit a listing for one wine, so I bracketed them together under the heading of the Eastern Mediterranean.

In 1989, I was privileged to host a rare vertical tasting of Château Musar in London, hosted by Serge Hochar. He was one of the most remarkable people I ever met. This began my own interest in Lebanese wines. At that time there were not so many Lebanese wineries. Over the years, I was able to get to know most of them, tasted their wines, and often met their winemakers at wine exhibitions.

I came to Israel and started working for Yarden in the early 1990s. On two separate occasions, a famous wine journalist wanted to visit us in Israel. However, Israel was not a big enough of a wine story on its own for them to justify a visit. However, when I also suggested

MICHAEL KARAM, Lebanon's foremost wine expert and author of 'Wines of Lebanon.'



a trip to Musar, it all became worthwhile in their eyes, even though they had to take an extra day to travel from Israel to Lebanon via Cyprus.

Israel and Lebanon have much in common: the long history, the proximity, the immense variety and the ever-improving quality. Yet we both encounter similar problems in the wider world. Israeli wines are mainly seen as being kosher for an ethnic Jewish market, and Lebanese wines are mainly sold in Arabic or Lebanese restaurants. It is hard to break out of the ethnic furrow.



From left:
THE BEAUTIFUL vineyards of the Bekaa Valley.

A VINEYARD belonging to Chateau Marsyas, one of Lebanon's leading small wineries.

For the hotel group and wine journalists, Israel or Lebanon on their own were not of interest, but together they were all the more attractive. These experiences along with many years of marketing Israeli wines overseas made me think we should market the East Med region as one. Together we would have a real story and be of far more interest to wine buyers and sommeliers. Imagine Cypriot, Greek, Lebanese, Turkish and Israeli wines together on the wine shelves, and Greek, Lebanese and Israeli wines together on wine lists. The impact would be greater. And what a story it would be.

IN THE EARLY 2000s when I joined Carmel, then Israel's largest winery, I tried to form a consortium called "Wine Without Borders," with one winery from each country. It was original, well before its time, but the idea fell flat because fear, politics and prejudice – by rote – put pride of place above marketing practicality. I soon understood that there would never be cooperation between producers. However, it could still happen in the marketplace. My vision remained an unfulfilled dream, but to my intense pleasure, it is now beginning to happen at the importer, distributor and retail levels.

Whether the region is called the Eastern Mediterranean, "Ancient World" or Levant does not matter. Each country offers something different, and they really complement each other. Of course, as explained, the Eastern Med includes Cyprus, Greece, Lebanon, Turkey and Israel. For the Ancient World, you simply add Armenia and Georgia. And if we are talking about developed wine countries in the Levant, it is really down to Lebanon and Israel.

Back to Lebanon. The excellent book *Wines of Lebanon* by Michael Karam, Lebanon's leading wine writer, was published in 2005. It contains wonderful prose, great photos and fascinating stories. It tells the story of Lebanese wines from the seafaring Phoenicians, the greatest wine traders of all, until the present day. It was this book that prompted the idea of a film that has just been released called *Wine and War*, and it is a tour de force.

Filmmakers Mark Johnston and Mark Ryan met

Michael Karam and cooked up the idea. They then went on to meet 35 winemakers, four archaeologists, seven wine critics, a novelist and even a Trappist monk who had previously been resident at Latrun Monastery. The movie is interesting, informative and riveting to the end. I have watched it twice so far.

I am happy that it features the two great patriarchs of Lebanese wine who are, sadly, no longer with us: Serge Hochar of Château Musar and Michel de Bustros of Château Kefraya. Both were icons who were extremely kind and friendly to me on the few occasions we met. No film without them would have been complete. Masters of Wine Jancis Robinson and Michael Broadbent, the world's most preeminent wine (and fermented beverages) archaeologist Patrick McGovern, and author Elizabeth Gilbert of *Pray, Eat and Love* fame are also featured.

The film is filled with worthwhile quotes and shards of wisdom. My favorite is: "Just like people, wine is something you cannot judge until you have seen it in every season of its being." It goes on, "So don't rush to judgment on a wine or person." This pearl, passed on by Elizabeth Gilbert in the film, almost inevitably came from Serge Hochar.

There is also a great insight into the Lebanese-owned Domaine de Bargylus in Syria. Can there be any place on the planet where it is more difficult to make wine? I suppose if there are any experts in making wine in the midst of a civil war, it is the Lebanese!

When I saw the film, I was concerned how Israel would be shown. Not all was comfortable to hear, but Israel was mentioned without judgment and received no worse coverage than the factions or countries that have kept Lebanon in an almost permanent state of conflict.

The inherent violence of the region has also reached Israeli wine. We have had a suicide bombing in a bus alongside a vineyard, when body parts had to be scraped off the vines. We have had situations in the critical time before harvest, when wine growers were forbidden to enter their vineyards because of a barrage of rockets. Winery workers have had to stay in bunkers instead of working at the winery. I myself have had to take cover from rocket fire in deep underground wine

cellars. So it is true to say, as Michael Karam points out in the film, we do not live in a good neighborhood. However, to be fair, as far as wine and war are concerned, the Lebanese have suffered more than anyone in this dangerous area.

Regarding Lebanon today, there are 50 wineries producing eight million bottles a year. The oldest producers are Ksara, established 1857, and Domaine des Tourelles, founded 1868. The largest winery is Ksara followed by Kefraya, then Musar. The main varieties are Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Merlot, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier. Cinsault is the workhorse grape of Lebanon, in the same way it is Carignan in Israel. Their main indigenous grapes are Merwah and Obeideh. Some 90% of the wine is grown in the Bekaa Valley. Other regions are Batroun, Mount Lebanon and South Lebanon. Chateau Musar and Kefraya's Comte de M are the most famous wines in Lebanon... and Chateau Musar is arguably the most famous wine in the eastern Med.

Wine is a brotherhood above politics. I care what happens to my wine-making friends there. Onlookers can't fail to be affected by the apocalyptic August 4 explosion in Beirut. Whether you are interested in the Levant or history, this film is warmly recommended. For wine lovers, it is a must. All proceeds from the film www.wineandwar.com will go towards children without insurance.

Final word to Serge Hochar, with two quotes that are the bookends of the film. At the beginning he says, "Wine does not care about war. Yeast makes the wine even if people are fighting." In other words, wine goes on, whatever. So true. The film finishes with a hint of phlegmatic optimism: "Wine makes people communicate and when you communicate you make peace, you don't make war." Winemakers of the world unite! With apologies to Johnnie Walker's iconic slogan: Keep talking! ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran who has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years and been a fervent advocate of the Eastern Mediterranean as a quality wine region.
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