

Yael Gai of the Golan Heights Winery, the foreign minister of Israeli wine. (Golan Heights Winery)

Bottom: THE LATE Carmi Lebenstein was honored with a Lifetime Award by the Terravino Competition. (Carmi Lebenstein)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

WOMEN IN WINE



When I first became involved in the wine trade in the UK, it was very much a man's world. There would be alcohol-infused late lunches, tastings would be likened to a men's drinking club, and most of the production chain from vineyard to sommelier or retailer would be the preserve of men only. To say the wine trade was sexist and chauvinist would not be an exaggeration. As regards the vineyard and winery, there was a feeling that the work was too physical for women, and outside the gates of the winery, sales, tastings and schmoozing were always seen as a men-only pursuit. Furthermore, in those days, even the wine writers and critics were almost exclusively men.

The prejudice went even deeper. In Catholic countries, including France, Italy and Spain, women winemakers were regarded with suspicion well into the last century. It sounds primitive now, but it was thought the menstrual cycle would affect the wine in a negative way. In the Jewish kosher world, women winemakers were frowned upon for a different reason. The religious authorities believed in separating the genders. At kosher wineries, the workers were exclusively men.

Gradually, overseas, the barriers broke down. In the 1970s and 1980s the first women became Masters of Wine and Master Sommeliers. This was accompanied by findings that women were in fact better tasters than men, and women pioneers blew away the cobwebs of smoke-filled rooms and pin-stripe suits. Fortunately, we have developed as a society since then and women are now involved in every aspect of the wine chain, but it has not become so common as not to still be an occasional talking point.

In Israel there were two pioneers who showed the way. One was Tali Sandovski, winemaker at the Golan Heights Winery. She became the first female winemaker in Israel in 1986. She ensured continuity as the winery made its way in the early years, with a different winemaker almost every year. Then she was a steady hand as the baton was passed from Jim Klein to Victor Schoenfeld in 1992. Since then, she has been the ever-present, loyal lieutenant to the head winemaker. Tali is very clever, talented, yet quiet, modest and undemanding. She has played an important part in the winery's success. She has never demanded the limelight and never received the credit she deserves, but she has been a permanent fixture in all the winery's triumphs.

The equivalent in the winery office was the late Carmi Lebenstein, who recently passed away in tragic circumstances, well before her time. She was virtually born in a bottle. Her family were wine traders. She herself was a successful retailer, and then joined Carmel Mizrahi in 1984 in sales. She progressed to become sales manager and then marketing manager of Carmel, when it was by far the largest winery with 75% of the market.

She was street-smart, savvy and knew all the tricks and shticks of the wine world. Carmi showed she could compete in this competitive, manly atmosphere, by giving as good as she got. Though tiny in build, she was big in stature and could use her sharp tongue and elbows as well as any man. As a marketer, she was innovative, creative and always thinking out of the box.

I worked with both Tali and Carmi, and I must say I never regarded them as an unusual species because they were women. They were just both so good at their jobs that the issue of gender was irrelevant. However, looking back with hindsight, they were trail-blazers on the Israel wine scene.

Today, women abound in our industry, but it was



MICHAL AKERMAN (left), Tabor Winery agronomist, appointed manager of the winery. (Tabor Winery)

TALI SANDOVSKI, the loyal, talented and longest-serving winemaker at the Golan Heights Winery. (Golan Heights Winery)

not always that way. I worked at one winery where the rabbi for a time flatly refused to allow a woman winemaker to join the winemaking team. I then worked for another winery where one of the associate winemakers was not Jewish, which she emphasized by wearing a crucifix to work!

Now, I am pleased to say, each of the largest wineries has women winemakers: Anat Keider Gershon and Shiri Rosenthal Kobe at Barkan, Meital Damari at Carmel, and Dorit Segev and Tali Sandovski at the Golan Heights Winery. Winemakers like Irith Boxer Shank (Barkan), Orna Chillag (Chillag), Naama Sorkin (Dalton, Ortal), Yael Sandler (Binyamina, Ella Valley) and Nitzan Swersky (Ahat) have ensured that a woman winemaker in a winery is not as unusual as it once was.

One of the highest profile winemaker-educators today is Roni Saslove. She was winemaker of Saslove Winery and has become one of our best wine educators and communicators. Her courses are held at the Seren DPT wine venue in Jaffa. She has also become one of our most visible wine media personalities. She is very articulate in English and Hebrew and exudes warmth, enthusiasm and professionalism. She is currently co-authoring a new book to be called *Wine Journey – Israel Adventure*.

THE FIRST female sommelier of note was Hadas Ezer, of the famed Keren Restaurant in the 1990s. Some of our best sommeliers today are women. Before becoming a winemaker, Yael Sandler was a sommelier and became the first woman to win the Yarden Award for Best Sommelier. The two leading sommeliers at the moment are Mor Bernstein, current holder of the Yarden Sommelier Award, and Shira Tsiddon of the Norman Hotel, winner of the award for the best wine list and wine program. The number of Israelis who have gained the WSET Diploma (Wine and Spirits Education Trust) may be comfortably counted on two hands. Sandler, Bernstein and Tsiddon have each gained this important, international recognition in the last few years.

Believe it or not, the first female manager of an Israeli winery was Rosa Shor in the early part of the 20th century. Her husband, Shmuel, was the second generation of the Shor family winery, founded in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1848. It was the earliest of all the existing wineries. When Shmuel passed away, Rosa took over the management of the winery. This included moving the winery from the Old City, and setting it up again at Beit Israel in Western Jerusalem in 1925. Being deep in the haredi (ultra-Orthodox) world and embedded in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, it was certainly a milestone event.

In modern times, we have had quite a few women winery executives. The longest-lasting CEO of a large

winery was Anat Rushansky Levy. She was CEO of the Golan Heights Winery for 10 years. Previously, she was marketing manager, then export manager for the USA. She certainly broke a glass ceiling, too. Of course, a woman reaching the pinnacle is not a guarantee of success, and Levy followed on from two legendary CEOs – Segev Yerovam and Shalom Blayer – who were loved and respected by everyone. She was always compared to them.

The lesson is that a successful CEO is a good one, and an unsuccessful CEO is a bad one, and sex has nothing to do with it. I came across one female CEO who waltzed in from outside the wine trade, assumed she understood everything, and thought everyone else was stupid. She was more aggressive and more of a bully than any man, did not do the work or make the effort to learn the wine trade, and was an abject failure. On the credit side, Ronit Badler was someone who was professional and made a good impression while she was CEO at Galil Mountain.

The latest new manager of a winery is Michal Akerman. She is curly-headed, with a great smile and friendly manner. As an agronomist, she introduced the concept of ecological vineyards at Tabor Winery. Michal, always bright-eyed, keen to talk and share, is now the manager of Tabor. There are winemakers who manage wineries, but she is the first agronomist to do so.

As far as the business of wine is concerned, I remember sitting next to the export manager of Olivia at some course many years ago. That was the first time I met Yael Gai. In 2007, she was appointed the international marketing manager of the Golan Heights Winery. As the Golan Heights Winery is Israel's leading exporter, and Yarden is arguably Israel's main wine ambassador, Gai has become a major spokesman and representative of Israeli wine internationally.

For the last 14 years she has been bringing Israeli wine to the forefront in Europe and the Far East, with style, attention to detail, a sharp business sense, and the smarts and the ability to sell image, a perception of quality, Brand Israel, as well as containers of Yarden, Gamla and Hermon wines. She is the foreign minister and an ongoing illustration of how trading in wine is certainly not only for men. To reinforce the point, today the export managers of Barkan (Lea Lehavi) and Carmel (Etti Edri), are also women.

There are two other marketers I greatly respect. One is Carmit Ehrenreich, formerly with Golan Heights Winery and Galil Mountain, now marketing manager of Jerusalem Vineyard Winery and marketing consultant to Bazelet Hagolan, among others. The other is Vered Ben Saidon, owner of Tura Winery. Both are passionate, dynamic, and pushy in a good way, with excellent marketing instincts.

Among the wine critics, the main female player is



RONI SASLOVE, winemaker-educator and a representative of Israeli wine in the media. (Roni Saslove)

Mira Eitan, who for many years has written about wine, beer and spirits. For a period of time she was editor of the *Wine, Gourmet and Alcohol* magazine. Then she worked at Carmel as public relations manager. She now writes for *Shulchan* and *Sanhedrink*. Once she was the only woman invited to wine tastings but that is also changing.

Thankfully, Israeli wine has developed and become more enlightened. Women are now deeply embedded in the wine trade and they greatly enrich us in every way. For those cynical, doubting Thomases who are still reluctant to take women seriously, they should know that most of the wine in Israel is purchased... by women! ■

The writer, a wine-trade veteran, has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com