

NEW BEGINNINGS: Amichai Lourie of Shiloh Winery plants a vine.  
(Photos: Shiloh Winery)



# TURNING A HOBBY INTO A PROFESSION



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**A**michai Lourie was once a renovations contractor. He was disciplined, hardworking, and thrived on the challenges provided. There was a variety of work, but to every job, no matter what it was, he gave his all. He relished the physical work and prided himself on the speed and quality of his service. His character was well suited to this job.

Lourie was a “do-it-yourself” merchant, and this applied to everything. He grew his vegetables, baked his matza at Passover, and baked his bread for the rest of the year. The source of the food was important to him. He was driven by the concept that it had to be done right, and given a choice, it was preferable to do it himself. Sometimes, he would even slaughter a lamb, butcher it and then fill up the freezer. It seems to be an eccentric way of putting a lamb chop on the table, but it says something about the person. The principle and the journey of the process, was as important as the end result.

He also made his own wine, producing 2,000 bottles, quite a lot for a home winemaker. There were no half measures with Amichai Lourie. He took over the utility room at home, and converted it into a wine room. Then, not satisfied with that, he dug a cave in his backyard to provide a naturally cool place for wine storage.

At the beginning of the 2000's, he and his wife

decided to take the winemaking course organized by the Soreq Winery Winemaking School. Their thinking was: “If we are going to make wine, let's at least do it properly.” To this day, he gives credit to Nir Shaham, owner of Soreq Winery. He taught him the philosophy of winemaking, the calm approach and the importance of building a relationship with the growers.

Then fate took a hand. Lourie broke his wrist. It was not a serious break, but any break of the wrist is complicated because of all the little bones. During the period of recovery, he organized a wine tasting, invited guests and talked about the wines on show with a passion and enthusiasm that was both noticeable and infectious. One of the guests that evening was a Mexican lawyer, entrepreneur and Zionist called Dr. Mayer Chomer. He was also a wine lover. While he was working on his PhD in Spain, he had become frustrated at the lack of quality kosher wines available. Afterwards, he approached Lourie and uttered the now immortal words: “I am founding a winery. Why don't you turn your hobby into a profession and come and be my winemaker?”

Shiloh Winery was founded in 2005 in the Central Mountains, near Ancient Shiloh. This was the home of the Ark of the Covenant and Tabernacle for the Jewish people 3,000 years ago, before Jerusalem. Winemaking was a mainstay of the economy then, and Shiloh Winery renewed the tradition of winemaking in the same place, in our days.

Amichai Lourie exchanged a profession where there

was instant gratification, to one where success was judged over years, even decades. However, it suited his abilities, his hunger and his passion. It certainly kept him fulfilled but also busy. Yaakov Berg from the nearby Psagot Winery once confided in him: “in the wine business there are two seasons. In one you are very busy and in the other, frantically busy.”

APART FROM the practical winemaking course, he had no formal training. However, Amichai Lourie learned, listened, and absorbed knowledge and ideas like a sponge. He was well capable of testing new theories by trial and error, and was not so locked into an idea that he could not toss it aside if it did not work. What he discovered was that he had great intuition. His instinct was often proved correct and the fact he was not tied to formula in books and academia, meant he was free from dogma and able to be more flexible and creative.

In fact, he relished the responsibility and the freedom. His natural perfectionism was applied on a larger field. The vineyards are mainly in the Central Mountains but also in the Galilee. Lourie insists on walking the vineyards regularly, and he really believes a grower who has empathy with his vineyards affects the final wine. He also gathered together a winemaking team at the winery, who are loyal to his way. The soloist, who would do everything if only he could, has learned to delegate and convey his objectives and passion with those who now share the task.



Of course, the rest is history. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Shiloh Winery began by winning a satchel full of medals at Terravino, Israel's only international wine tasting competition. In 2011, the winery won three first place gold medals in the main red wine categories, at the Eshkol Hazahav wine tasting competition. This was a result that shocked the wine brotherhood. Since then the winery has gone from strength to strength. For example, five times in the last 10 years, the Shiloh Secret Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon has won first place in its category. It has become by far the winery's most awarded wine, but the awards have also been spread across the portfolio.

At the Decanter World Wine Awards 2020 in London, Shiloh became the first ever Israeli winery to gain two gold medals in one year. The winning wines were the Secret Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 and the Mosaic Exclusive Edition 2017, the icon wine of the winery. Both wines scored 95 points, but impressive though that was, no fewer than seven other Shiloh wines were awarded a silver medal, each scoring a minimum of 90 points. Now as a winery veteran, I am pretty cynical about competitions. I don't take them too seriously. The truth is if you win a prize you shout to the skies, but if you don't, you diss the competition. However, you can't knock continued success and third-party recognition at the highest level.

So, as a winemaker, Amichai Lourie earned his spurs. Shiloh Winery became one of our more successful boutique wineries. The winery produces 230,000 bottles a year under the labels Privilege, the entry level, Shor, Legend, Secret Reserve up to the prestige label Mosaic. The Shor and Secret labels are of varietal wines, (that is named after the predominant grape variety), whilst the Privilege, Legend and Mosaic are blends. The wines are made in a New World style, ripe fruit, full bodied, oaky with great depth. This is a style people like.

THE WINERY also sells an astonishing 60% of its production in export. This is way above the average. This reveals another of Lourie's skills. When he began his professional wine journey, he was advised by Haim Gan, owner of Ish Anavim and organizer of Terravino, to put himself in the front of the PR and marketing efforts. He explained that people liked to see the face of the winemaker. Wine is the story of a person and a place. Amichai explained to me that this was not naturally in his nature. Seeing him today, it is hard to believe, but he had to learn, change tack and spend time in the market. This is no different to the bashful chef, who has to be persuaded to go around the tables. The difference was that this busy winemaker made him himself available to his customers, importers and the liquor stores in America. With charm, empathy and warmth, combined with the personal touch, he took the time to shmooze in the market. As a result of Lourie's personal investment, Shiloh Winery's image in the United States is even greater than here.

Shiloh Winery is also one of the most active wineries in social media, being as up to date as tomorrow. Lourie is active in a large number of the short films that are published. More often these feature Lourie in the vineyards, Lourie cooking large slabs of meat or Lourie eating large slabs of meat... once a carnivore, always a carnivore. Always, with a glass of Shiloh wine in hand, of course. All this takes time. Many busy wine-makers shudder when asked to put their head above the parapet on behalf of public relations. The fact that



SECRET RESERVE Cabernet Sauvignon, Mosaic Exclusive Edition.

Amichai Lourie gives of himself so much is greatly to his credit.

A good example was when the recent snow storm occurred. Within 24 hours, wineries posted photos of snow covered vineyards. Shiloh Winery just went an extra mile. They came out with a very short film presumably shot by a drone, flying over the snow covered vineyards. This is indicative of the winery's approach. They never do

the minimum when they can do the maximum. It is a constant excellence that sets them apart.

As such this particular winemaker expanded his responsibilities to reach not from the vine to the bottle like most of his colleagues, but all the way to the glass. He understood it is comparatively easy to make wine, but it is selling it that is difficult. Or as the late Carmi Lebenstein said, "winemaking is art, selling is a profession." Amichai Lourie embraced that part of the job most winemakers shy away from.

Many wineries play up their relationship with the terroir of a region. Shiloh Winery has chosen a different approach. Their birth is with ancient Israel, biblical history and Judaism. This is what they wear on their sleeves with great pride. When Amichai Lourie is walking the vineyard, he is not talking about climate or soil, but his feeling of being part of a timeline of history, renewing an ancient craft in modern times. No doubt, he feels the weight of Jewish history with every step he takes and decision he makes.

Amichai Lourie is generous and quick to give credit to others. He admires Shiki Rauchberger, winemaker of Teperberg Winery, and enjoys sharing notes with Yaacov Oryah (ex Psagot, now Pinto Winery.) He thinks Victor Schoenfeld is a genius and marvels how



THE WINEMAKER tastes the wine.

the Golan Heights Winery still makes wine with the care and attention of a small, handcrafted winery. He gives kudos to Shmuel Boxer (ex-CEO of Barkan) for encouraging the planting of vineyards in the region. As for himself, the "Do It Yourself Winemaker" is not doing a bad job at all. Maybe some of the other wineries will soon start learning from him!

*The writer is a wine trade veteran who has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years. He is referred to as "the English voice of Israeli wine." [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*

SHILOH WINERY vineyard in the Central Mountains of Judea and Samaria.

