

CREMISAN MONASTERY with its beautiful terraced vineyards and olive groves. (Photos: Cremisan Winery)



LOOKING EAST IN THE LEVANT



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

I am a passionate advocate of Israeli wines and strongly believe Israel is an integral part of what is called the “Eastern Mediterranean Wine Region.” In the ancient world, this region was the cradle of wine culture. In modern times, Israeli wines should be on the shelves with bottles from other countries from this same region, such as Cyprus, Greece, Lebanon and Turkey.

The Levant is a smaller region within the East Med. Israel and Lebanon have well-developed wine industries, but in this article I am looking toward the east. The Levant also includes Syria, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and the northern part of Egypt, around Alexandria. All these regions have grown wine for 5,000 years or more. The Israeli wine industry can be narcissistic, inward-looking and preoccupied with how good we are, but it is instructive, educational and indeed common sense to raise our heads, look around and sniff the air occasionally.

The best wine from the most unlikely place is Domaine Bargylus near Latakia, the port city in western Syria. The Saadé family, owner of Chateau Marsyas in Lebanon, founded the winery in 2003. The soils are

clay and limestone and the vineyard is at an elevation of 900 meters. Showing seriousness and professionalism, they employed the respected Stephane Derenoncourt from Bordeaux as their winemaking consultant. Since the Civil War began in 2011, making wine has become fraught, even dangerous, with daily activities more akin to a James Bond film than a regular winery. Just to taste the grapes, Sandro and Karim Saadé have to commandeer a taxi to collect grapes in specially cooled boxes and go through roadblocks to bring them to Beirut. There, they are tasted briefly before a thumbs-up signal is given of when to harvest.

The red is made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot. The previous edition of *The World Atlas of Wine* referred to it as the finest red wine in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is rich, full-bodied and mouth-filling but finishes quite elegantly with long, lingering flavors. It is certainly a very fine wine. I have not tasted the white, made from Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

IN JORDAN, Bulos Zumot started to make wine in 1954. It went up a gear when his son Omar founded Zumot Winery in 1996. He chose Saint George as a brand name, as the Madaba vineyard in central Jordan was near the church of the same name. From the

beginning the wines were farmed organically. They developed two new sites: above Jerash at 1,000 meters elevation in the northeast and at Sama at an altitude of 630 meters, close to the Syrian border. They grow mainly international varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Shiraz, Petit Verdot, Chardonnay and Gewurztraminer; they also have Pinot Noir and Marselan. Their winemaker is Bulgarian Iva Boyuklieva, who has been with Zumot for nearly 14 years. People who taste the wines are always pleasantly surprised. The other winery in Jordan is JR Wines, (Jordan River) owned by the Haddad family, famous for their Haddad Arak. In 2004 they planted a vineyard on the Mafrq plateau, at 840 meters elevation.

PALESTINIAN WINES can be overlooked, because they are under the radar. True wine lovers will find them fascinating, unless prevented from engaging by either the kosher barrier or blind nationalism. We do have Israeli-Arab-owned wineries in Israel and some pretty good ones at that. Wineries like Ashkar, Jascala, Julia, Latroun and Mony are well worth visiting, producing good wines. However, there are also wineries under the auspices of the Palestine Authority, where there are some passionate growers and individual winemakers producing good-quality wines as well.



The most famous Palestinian winery is Cremisan Winery. Cremisan Monastery was founded by Father Antonio Belloni, an Italian Catholic monk, in 1885. The meaning of the word is *Kerem Zan*, the vineyard of Zan. The monastery belongs to the Italian Salesian Order. It is situated on the northern slopes of Mount Gilo, northwest of the Palestinian town Beit Jala, five kilometers from Bethlehem and 12 km from Jerusalem. The Monastery made wine to finance Father Belloni's social activities to help poor children in the Holy Land and to provide a livelihood.

The most striking thing are the artfully terraced vineyards and olive groves in the shadow of the Monastery and winery. In 2008, a new project was started to study native grape varieties. New equipment, advanced technology, imported expertise from Italy, all combined to rejuvenate the Cremisan Winery. Their spacious winery now combines the new and old under one roof. The winemaker and agronomist is Fadi Batarseh, who never drank wine when he was younger but decided he wanted to study something different. He went to all the trouble of learning Italian so he could study in Italy. He wrote his thesis on the indigenous varieties and returned in 2012. One of Italy's most famous winemakers, Riccardo Cotarella, is the winemaking consultant.

There are three vineyards. The Bethlehem area, including the monastery itself, was the source of grapes for many years. In 1968, after the Six Day War, they also used grapes from Bet Jamal, and they also purchase grapes from Dir Raffat and Hebron. They focus on their singular indigenous grape varieties: Baladi, Dabouki, Hamdani and Jandali and are the pioneers of these local varieties. Their wines appear under the Star of Bethlehem label. Creating particular interest is the Hamdani Jandali white blend, which garnered international recognition.

Taybeh Winery was founded in 2013 by the Khoury family, with fruit from vineyards in Taybeh, Birzeit and Aboud, not far from Ramallah. They founded a brewery, then a winery and finally a hotel. The family are pioneers of tourism in the area. The wine comes under the name Nadim (after one of the founding brothers), and offerings include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc; most interesting is the local indigenous variety Zeini. I once tasted Taybeh's wines and was not that impressed, but that was early on. My efforts to get to know them better since have not been successful.

The most fascinating Palestinian winery is Philokalia in Bethlehem. The name says something about the owner-winemaker, the cerebral Sari Khoury. Philokalia means "love of the beautiful and the good." Established in 2015, it is an artisan winery, and the wines are handcrafted, highly individualistic expressions. The wines are made using black clay jars. The striking, attractive labels are from paintings



(From left)
CREMISAN WINE Estate: Pioneers of making wine from the Holy Land's indigenous varieties.

THE DOMAINE Kassis Dabouki is one of the best examples of this local variety. (Domaine Kassis)

THE BARGYLUS Red is one of the finest wines in the Levant. (Adam Montefiore)

by Nasser Soumi, talented artist and an authority of Palestinian wine history through the ages. The wines are as natural as can be, made from local varieties grown in vineyards, from 60 years old upwards, in the Bethlehem and Hebron regions. His best-known wine is Grapes of Wrath, which is an amber wine. It is wild fermented (using natural not cultured yeasts), with the skins (like a red wine) and the wine is unfiltered. The vineyard for this wine was flattened with boulders by the IDF to build an access road, but the determined vines grew back; hence the name. It is rich, broad-flavored, with layers of complexity and is totally unique.

The wine grower or "vigneron" out of the Palestinian wineries is Domaine Kassis. The winemaker is Adam Kassis, who studied in Chile. He is also the winemaker of Domaine de Latroun at the Monastery, where he worked as a boy at the age of 11. The Kassis vineyard at Birzeit has been in the family for 100 years, once owned by Adam's grandparents. Then his grandmother used to make the wine for the family's use, probably from Dabouki grapes. The soil of the vineyard is terra rossa and limestone, the vines are unirrigated and it is at an altitude of 800 meters above sea level. Kassis makes a very promising, lively field blend from Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, and a fresh-style Chardonnay. He also makes a very good Dabouki, with a little Jandali, from high-elevation Bethlehem and Hebron vineyards. He is hardworking, ambitious, innovative and determined. Definitely one to watch.

WINEMAKING HAS a famed ancient history in Egypt from 5,000 years ago. They prized the wine of Canaan above all others and recorded their winemaking in tomb paintings. Theirs was possibly the first great

wine culture. Egypt is really in North Africa, but it may be stretched to say the vineyards, in between Alexandria and Cairo, are in the southern Levant. Nestor Gianacis, a Greek businessman and manufacturer of cigarettes, wanted to recreate the wine of the Pharaohs and Kings of Egypt. He founded Gianacis Wines, which since has been Egypt's leading winery. Over the years, ownership has changed. It was initially private, was later nationalized by Nasser and is now owned by Al-Ahram Beverages, a company related to Heineken. The winemaker is Frenchman Sebastien Boudry.

Sahara Vineyards is a more upscale brand associated with the group. The wines are largely sold to tourists and the most recognizable are a red called Omar Khayyam and a white Cru des Ptoleemes. Maybe slightly better is the Kouroum of The Nile Vineyards and their "Jardin du Nil" label. You would not go out of your way to seek Egyptian wines, but if there, you might be curious to taste them.

For kosher wine mavens, there are no kosher wines made in the Levant outside Israel, but three of the East Med countries do produce a kosher vintage. Lambouri Winery's Yain Kafrisin from Cyprus, Roussas Winery's Rose from Greece and Kavaklidere Winery's Ancyra from Turkey are not sold in Israel yet; however, they do exist.

With all the chatter in Israel, you would sometimes be led to think we are the most important wine country in the world. I call it Israeli football syndrome. It is always a reality check to go to an international wine exhibition and see Brazil and Uruguay with a larger stand than Israel. In a world of blind people, the one-eyed person is king.

Wine is above politics and wine people are a kind of brotherhood. It is always fascinating to look and listen. The wines of our neighbors are also part of the rich winemaking tapestry of the Levant. ■

The writer is a wine industry insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years. He is a pioneering advocate of the Eastern Mediterranean wine region. www.adammontefiore.com



THE VINEYARD of Domaine Bargylus near the port city of Latakia in Syria. (Adam Montefiore)