

THE SYRIAN vineyard that produces  
Domaine Bargylus. (Photos: Adam Montefiore)



# TEARS OF BACCHUS



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**W**ine in the Arab world sounds like a non sequitur, but it is not. Don't forget the Phoenicians were the greatest wine traders the world has seen and they influenced the prominence of the Levant in the development of wine and wine culture. Furthermore, the Lebanese today make wonderful wine. Their most well-known winery, Chateau Musar, is more famous than any Israeli wine and the previous edition of the *World Atlas of Wine* made the point that a wine from Syria, Domaine Bargylus, was considered the best wine in the Eastern Mediterranean. Humbling if you believe Israeli wines are the only wines in the world!

I was recently fortunate enough to read *Tears of Bacchus: A History of Wine in the Arab World*, by Michael Karam. Michael and I are mirror images. He is English Lebanese in a similar way that I am English Israeli. He is the world's spokesman for Lebanese wines. Whereas I contribute about Israeli wine to *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book*, *The World Wine Atlas* and Jancis Robinson

MW's *Oxford Companion to Wine*, Michael Karam is at the same time telling the same publications the story of Lebanese wine.

He has in the past written two books that I am proud to have in my library. *Wines of Lebanon* and *Arak & Mezze* are the literary standards for two of Lebanon's greatest gifts, that of wines and arak. I grew to love Lebanese wine over 30 years ago when I first met Serge Hochar of Chateau Musar and organized a memorable vertical tasting of Musar wines in London. I then put Musar and Yarden wines together on the wine lists of over 50 restaurants of the hotel group where I was wine manager, under the heading "Eastern Mediterranean." This was when my belief in the Eastern Mediterranean as a region was born and the beginning of an interest in Lebanese wine. Over the years, I came to know Lebanese wine quite well, including many of the winemakers, whom I met at wine exhibitions. I also got to know the Michel de Bustros who founded his Kefraya Winery during a war, and created Comte de M, the iconic wine of Lebanon, along with Musar. Sadly, both he and Serge Hochar, giants of Lebanese wine, are no longer with us. Lately with the proliferation of new wineries, it has been difficult to keep in touch, but I

have the utmost respect for the quality and variety of the Lebanese wine scene.

I HAVE always thought the differences between the Lebanese and Israeli wine industries, make both narratives complimentary, and yet the short distances and similarities in terroir mean we could learn a great deal from each other. Certainly, this small area of the Levant would comfortably fit into California. Whereas there is a chasm between both countries with regard to politics, the international consumer, sommelier and retailer see them together, leading a revival of this historical region.

Karam's new book is a stonking good read. He has gathered together a distinguished list of contributors to tell the story from the beginning of wine until today. The book is absorbing and I read it from cover to cover. Hugh Johnson, the world's most distinguished wine writer, wrote in the forward: "Michael Karam has succeeded in recruiting an intriguing bunch of writers... to bring this dramatic story to life with verve and passion and with a dollop of academic rigor thrown in." He explains, "the Middle East remains a turbulent, fascinating and intoxicating part of the world, but it

CHATEAU MARSYAS illustrates the new quality and depth of Lebanese wine.

DOMAINE BARGYLUS from Syria, one of the finest wines in the Levant.



them Israeli Arabs, but they also regard themselves as Palestinian. There is Ashkar Winery in Kfar Yasif in the Western Galilee, Jascala Winery based at Jish in the Upper Galilee, and Mony Winery, situated at the Dir Rafat Monastery in the Judean Foothills. Jordanian wine is unfortunately barely known outside Jordan. The Zumot family's Saint George wines are organic and highly regarded by those that taste them.

All these wineries remind us of the important heritage of Christian winemaking in the Eastern Mediterranean, Levant and Middle East. Certainly, they have a place in any history of the Arab wine world. However, their absence does not detract from the excellence of the book. *Tears of Bacchus* is both absorbing and fascinating, and is thoroughly recommended.

If this is a book that interests you, then *Milk of Lions* by Joseph El-Asmar is also well worth reading. It is a history of alcohol in the Middle East. Much of the subject

matter is similar, but the information is presented differently. Believe me, I read *Tears of Bacchus* in one day, and *Milk of Lions* the next. I could not put either book down. The author beautifully covers the paradox of Islamic wine poetry, with examples from different eras. The main difference is that the focus is on alcohol, including wine, and after a broad journey through the ages, the story distills into an explanation of arak Lebanese style. I know the Lebanese regard their arak with the same reverence that a Scotsman regards his whisky. Many winemakers I know are prouder of their arak than their wines!

The book was inspired by the author's decision to build a house in the middle of a vineyard close to Jezzine, in South Lebanon. His dream was not to produce wine, but to make a hand-crafted arak. This led to a whole series of questions about the history of arak in particular and alcohol in general, and he was unable to

find the information he sought. So, he decided to do his own research, and this very readable, informative book is the result. It is also highly recommended.

THE EASTERN Mediterranean is a wine region defined by war, strife and religion. Nowhere else in the wine world is religion an issue. However, the ongoing disputes between Greece and Turkey; Israel and Lebanon; Israel and the Palestinians; and the Republic of Cyprus and Northern Cyprus, are real and underline all daily activity. I know. I once made the mistake of ordering a Turkish coffee in Cyprus! Maybe if we all drank less coffee and more wine, the region would become a calmer place.

Making wine is basically an investment in tomorrow. Planting a vineyard in lands of strife is a statement of hope. Michael Karam writes: "The Arab wine industry... was born with early man, cultivated by the Phoenicians and celebrated in Baalbek by the cult of Bacchus. It can be found in monasteries and vineyards of Mount Lebanon and among the nation's bubbling arak stills. It is a story, woven from threads of myth and reality, tying a glorious past to a hopeful present...."

I salute the winemakers of the Levant for their courage, bravery and optimism. Unfortunately, politics is a divide that can't be breached at present, but wine is a brotherhood that extends above all. If the Levant includes Lebanese, Syrian, Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian wine, it is a tragedy we can't meet to put the world to rights over a glass of wine. We should, however, at least be able to meet on the shelves of wine shops and wine lists of restaurants alongside the other Eastern Mediterranean wines, of Cyprus, Greece and Turkey. Each individual country is clearly making their best wine in 2,000 years.

*Tears of Bacchus* implies sadness, but the renaissance of wine in the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean is a cause for happiness and joy. Let's hope Bacchus has wiped away the tears and is now smiling! ■

*Tears of Bacchus*, by Michael Karam, is published by Gilgamesh Publishing and costs £25.

The *Milk of Lions*, by Joseph El-Asmar, is published by Gilgamesh Publishing and costs £19.95.

The writer is a wine industry 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)

also gave us the gift of wine." The book leaps from Noah, the first vigneron, via the Canaanites, onto to the Phoenicians, not forgetting the influential legacy of the Greeks and Romans, then to the important Christian monasteries, finally arriving in the Lebanon of the 19th century. It is a book I will return to again and again, dipping in to read world-renowned experts like Patrick McGovern on the origins of wine, Alex Rowell on the wonderful Islamic wine poetry of Abu Niwas, Randall Hesketh on wine in the scriptures and the fascinating chapter on wine and Islam.

*Tears of Bacchus* was written after a discussion by Karam with the brothers Karim and Sandro Saadé. They are owners of Chateau Marsyas, one of the finest in the new wave of high-quality Lebanese wineries. They are also owners of the admirable Domaine Bargylus. Marsyas is situated in the Bekaa Valley, the famous wine region of Lebanon, not far from the magnificent Temple to Bacchus at Baalbek. Bargylus comes from the hills above the northern Syrian port city of Latakia. This country is fraught with well-documented problems. It is a wine that is made with more obstacles than almost any other wine on the planet. The determination to overcome the nightmare and carnage in order to make wine, speaks volumes about the morals, determination and vision of the Saadé family.

Lebanon focused for years on the international varieties. Recently there has been an encouraging focus in both previously unfashionable "adopted varieties" (as described by Karam), like Cinsault and indigenous varieties like Merwah and Obeideh. In the preface, Johnny Saadé writes that the proceeds of the book will go toward research into other local varieties. What a noble cause. It is almost worth purchasing the book for this reason alone. More similarities with Israel. We are also reviving our workhorse varieties like Carignan and experimenting with local varieties.

Considering that the title of the book referred to the "Arab world," I was disappointed it did not visit Jordanian, Palestinian and Moroccan wines in modern times. The monasteries Cremisan and Latroun have always proudly made Palestinian wine. Other Palestinian wineries include Taybeh Winery near Ramallah, Philokalia Winery from Bethlehem and Domaine Kassis from Bir Zeit. In Israel, we also have wineries owned by the Christian Arab community. I call

'TEARS OF Bacchus' by Michael Karam, Gilgamesh Publishing. (Photos: Gilgamesh Publishing)

RIGHT: 'THE Milk of Lions' by Joseph el-Asmar, Gilgamesh Publishing.

