



WHAT BOBAL & RAMBAM HAVE IN COMMON

THE BEAUTIFUL old vines of the Bobal variety, with thick trunks and grotesque shapes of their waving branches.
(Photos: Vina Memorias Winery)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

There are not many kosher wineries in Europe, though there is a large quantity of kosher wine produced there. This is often made by regular wineries deciding to also produce a kosher cuvee.

Spain, which has a tiny Jewish community, does not produce much kosher wine, but the wineries that do are pretty good. “Celler de Capcanes” from Monsant and Elvi, a family-owned negociant company, are good examples. They are making truly quality wines. Capcanes’ Peraj Ha’abib is legendary and Elvi’s Herenza brand is very good value. Their respective flagships La Flor del Flor de Primavera and Clos Mesorah are outstanding wines with deep complexity. Then there is the value brand Ramon Cardova, produced by Royal Wine Europe, whose wines are very drinkable.

Vina Memorias is the newest kid on the Spanish block. The winery represents a reasonably unfashionable wine region, a heavily planted, but relatively unknown grape variety and a family new to wine. It is a blend, or let’s say, “a paella” made up from a smidgen of France, Spain and Judaism, served up on the same plate. Paella is of course the iconic Spanish dish originally from Valencia and this region is only 75 km. from Utiel-Requena, where their vines are situated. This region has a long history, but it is not that well known.

I first came across the wines a year or two ago when Armando Caracena-Molcho, the foreign minister so to speak, came to present them in Israel. I was not

sure whether there was a market for the unknown Bobal grape variety, nor did I believe there was a need for more kosher wine in Spain. However, most of all, I thought it was prudent to wait and see, as it was a brand new winery.

However, Armando, who in Israel is known as Yitzhak, did impress me. He was tall, good-looking and confident, but respectful, as well as passionate, thorough and knowledgeable. I thought then that I would like to return to their wines at a later date. Now the time has come, as the wines really merit attention. The timing is right as the world is newly interested in unfashionable wine regions, in part as a rebellion against globalization. With Cabernet and Merlot seemingly growing everywhere, there is a new fetish for local, indigenous grape varieties.

ARMANDO IS one of three sons of Annie Molcho; each one is a valuable part of the family initiative, but have other interests spread over the globe. Armando is the one who came to Israel, fell in love with an Israeli and got married. His mother, Annie, is French, with Tunisian roots, with an emotional connection to Provence. She is a determined matriarch with a dream in her eyes, combined with an iron will and the drive that was not to be denied.

Armando’s grandmother was the one who owned vineyards. These were inherited by his father and the grapes were sold to the local cooperative, where they were lost in amorphous blends. They had old vine vineyards, but as is the case with old vines, there were increasingly low yields each year. Harvesting became less and less cost-effective and what they thought of as high-quality grapes, were not being appreciated or

used as such.

In 2015 they reached a crossroads. Was it worth continuing? Should the vineyard be sold or the vines grubbed up? On the other hand, the vines were gold dust; old maybe, but brimming with unfulfilled potential. It was a no-brainer. They decided, or rather Annie decided, to open a winery, and her family supported her wholeheartedly. From being distant owners of vineyards, they became hands-on winemakers.

Vina Memorias was founded in 2016. They have 18 hectares (180 dunams) of vineyards. The vines are between 600 to 900 meters above sea level. Most are over 65 years old. They also have precious blocks that are over 100 years old. The beautiful old vines with their thick trunks wave their branches in grotesque, artistic shapes, each vine different in its own ritual dance, as if to show its individuality. The soils are calcareous clay and Mediterranean breezes from the east cool the hot vines. Vina Memorias produces 45,000 bottles year. The first year the wine was made at the cooperative, under their instructions, and since then they share a winery with the local large producer of Cava in San Antonio.

The unique selling point of this region is the Bobal grape variety. It is the third largest planted variety in Spain, but is barely known. The word means “bull” because the grape cluster can have a triangular outline similar to a bull’s head. The wines produced from this variety have very good fruit and a refreshing acidity. Historically, they tended to be over-cropped and used in bulk wines or inexpensive blends. Recently pioneers in the region, like Vina Memorias, have illustrated that lower yields and careful winemaking can produce wines of good quality, which are all the



THE UTIEL-REQUENA wine region is 70km from Valencia.



ANNIE MOLCO & Enrique Caracena-Murciano: Long-term vineyard owners became hands-on winemakers.

more interesting to the curious because of the region and grape variety.

The winery has a wine named after Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known as the Rambam. It is called *Memorias del Rambam*. Internationally he is better known as Maimonides. He was a legendary Sephardi rabbi, philosopher and doctor who commanded international respect that crossed religions and nations. As a doctor he recommended wine in moderation for good health. As a rabbi, he preferred that wine for religious ritual would be a quality wine that was not *mevushal* (then boiled, today flash pasteurized) or sweetened with added sugar. As a philosopher he extolled the middle way and was against extremism. He was a giant of his time and one of the most outstanding scholars in Jewish history and a beacon of Jewish wisdom for all time. Seeing things through the wine bubble as I tend to do, I regard him as the first Jewish wine connoisseur.

THE WINE in his name has an attractive grey label, with an etching of the Rambam in its center. The *Memorias del Rambam Crianza 2016* is made from 100% Bobal, from old vines that are a minimum of 65 years old. It was aged in small American oak barrels. I found the oak quite dominant and aromatic. It almost overpowered the fruit, but it is a well-made wine in a style many will like.

The *Yunikko 2018* (meaning unique) is one of two

flagship wines and it was simply delicious. The label is decorated with a painting by Gilbert Rigaud of Provence, and it illustrates three figures. These represent the three sons and the choice of painter celebrates the French Provençal roots of Annie Molcho. The wine was fermented and aged in 1,000-liter clay jars, known in Spanish as *tinajas*. The wine is softly aromatic and very fruity; it has a satisfying silky mouth-feel and a beautiful long and well-balanced finish. It was easy to drink because of its freshness and texture. It is a wine I will look forward to tasting again.

The entry-level wines are produced under the *Alenar* label. The word “Alenar” means that first intake of breath when you see something beautiful. The *Alenar 745 Red 2020* is fresh, vibrant and fruity with aromas of cherries and strawberries. It was comparatively light in the mouth with great acidity and a refreshing finish. A good summer wine, or what I call a drinking wine – that is “drinking” as opposed to “tasting.” The *Alenar 745 Rose 2020* has red berry aromas and is crisp and flavorful through to the finish. This will go well with *Mezze*.

The *Alenar 767 White 2020* is made from 80% Macabeo and 20% Sauvignon Blanc. It is fragrant, fresh and only 12% alcohol. The Macabeo is heavily planted in Spain and is usually known as *Viura* in the Rioja Region. There is no proof that Macabeo is named after the Macabees, but there is nothing to

disprove it either and hey, who am I to spoil a good story by the truth? Recently Vitkin Winery produced the first wine in Israel from this variety. My favorites of the three wines were the red, followed by the rose.

Vina Memorias also produces a very acceptable Cava, called *Memorias del Rambam Brut Reserva*. Their partner winery is the sparkling wine specialist in the region. It is made by the traditional method (i.e. the same method as is used in Champagne.) I must say it is a fine, fresh sparkling wine with some complexity on the nose.

The idea of making the wine kosher was insisted on by Annie. A nod to her Jewish roots, feeling a touch of Jewish pride, but on the face of it, it has to be said that it also was not a bad marketing decision. General wine lovers are always looking for something new. Here, with a region that is not that familiar and an introduction to the Bobal and Macabeo grapes, there is plenty here to entice the curious wine lover. As for the kosher world, I am fully aware many readers drink only kosher wine, yet I often write about non-kosher wines too. So it is with pleasure that I introduce you to *Vinas Memorias*, a classic cross-over winery that will be of great interest to wine connoisseurs and kosher machers.

Armando told me how wonderful it is “to put your soul and personality into something.” The family is a blend of French finesse and Jewish roots on his mother’s side, Spanish pride and attachment to the land on their father’s side. This has resulted in a love and respect for their land and terroir, and their dream to turn the fruit of their vines into wine, has come true. ■

The writer, a wine industry insider turned wine writer, has advanced Israeli wines for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com



THE YUNIKKO (left) , one of their flagship wines, was fermented and aged in tinajas.

ARMANDO (YITZHAK) CARACENA MOLCHO, who lives in Israel, with the Alenar wines and Cava.