



Wine masters in Israel



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The Jewish state recently hosted a delegation of 12 Masters of Wine. This was arguably the most prestigious wine visit to Israel since Baron Edmond de Rothschild first arrived in 1887! The Institute of Masters of Wine is the parent body that administers the Master of Wine program. There are only 370 people on planet earth certified as Masters of Wine, who are permitted to put the letters MW at the end of their name.

When you consider the number of winemakers, sommeliers, wine buyers and wine critics there are, you can appreciate that to be a Master of Wine is to be the cherry on the very top of the large wine knowledge cake. They form the *crème de la crème* and carry the utmost respect of the community of all wine professionals. I have been in the wine trade for more than 35 years, yet I am always full of admiration – almost in awe of these giants who represent the pinnacle of our industry.

In Israel we have only one MW to date. He is Eran Pick, CEO and winemaker of Tzora Vineyards. The fact he was welcomed into the MW fold contributed greatly to the visit to Israel becoming a possibility. The visit was financed by the Israel Export Institute, and organized by Daphna Sternfeld, the deputy director-general, and Yaara Shimony, who is the manager of the wine sector. They must have done a great job. When Barbara Abraham MW said, “I have been to many MW

trips to countries all over the world, and this was the most interesting and best organized. Each day was so different...,” I felt I should report further.

The Institute of Masters of Wine advertised the visit to Israel amongst its members. Apparently, the interest was enormous, and MWs oversubscribed, so the final list had to be chosen by ballot. The MWs who came to Israel included Barbara Abraham, Emma Dawson, Rosemary George, John Hoskins, Victor Stephens-Clarkson and Demetri Walters from Great Britain, Essi Avellan and Taini Vilkuina from Finland, Jeremy Cukierman from France, David Forer from Canada / Spain, Robin Kick from the US / Switzerland and Andrea Pritzker from Canada / Australia.

The visit concentrated on vineyards, master classes and tastings which were designed to show Israeli wine at its best, in all its variety. The vineyards visited were Shoresh in the Judean Hills, Shvo in the Upper Galilee and Bar'on in the northern Golan Heights. Eran Pick hosted the group in the Shoresh vineyard, showing the unique terroir of the Judean Hills and the soil of shallow terra rossa on a deep bedrock of limestone. Gaby Sadan, winemaker of Shvo Vineyard, explained his philosophy in the vineyard he himself planted in the foothills of Mount Meron in the Upper Galilee. The Bar'on visit in the volcanic Golan Heights was hosted by Victor Schoenfeld, head winemaker of the Golan Heights Winery.

ERAN PICK MW, Gaby Sadan and Victor Schoenfeld are arguably the three superstar winemakers of Israeli wine. Pick is a study in the pursuit of excellence

through perfection. He makes wine from a single vineyard, divided into parcels or plots. His desire is to make a wine with a sense of place, reflecting the terroir of the Shoresh vineyard. His is a very studious approach. Sadan is a rare example of a winemaker who was able to choose exactly where to plant his vineyard, selecting the varieties from scratch. He is a true “vigneron.” He represents back-to-basics viticulture and making wine with soul. I once wrote an article about him headlined “The Wild Man of the Galilee.”

Schoenfeld represents the cutting edge of viticulture and winemaking. His database of information, by whatever parameter you choose to consider, is mind blowing. The Golan Heights Winery must be one of the most advanced in the world in viticulture technology. If the idea was to give the distinguished guests a feel for the terroir of the Judean Hills, Upper Galilee and Golan Heights, they could not have chosen three better people to represent the three regions, yet all represent a different approach.

Then there were master classes covering all Israel's wine regions. One was held at Domaine du Castel's breathtaking new winery in Yad Hashmona. A presentation was given about the Judean and Shomron hills. This was followed by a tutored tasting. The second master class was about the Galilee, held at the Kishor Winery. This is an estate winery and is part of a village called Kishorit for adults with special needs. There were explanations about the Galilee terroir and region, followed by a tutored tasting of wines from the area.



The MASTERS of Wine, clad in white suits, visit the Golan Heights Nursery and Propagation Block.
(Photos: David Silverman)

(CLOCKWISE FROM top left) Daphna Sternfeld and Yaara Shimony of the Israel Export Institute, who organized the MW visit, in the Shvo vineyard in the Upper Galilee.

AN INFORMAL wine tasting on the Flam Winery patio.

THE MWs in the Shores vineyard, taken by Tzora Vineyards CEO and MW Eran Pick.

THE GOLAN Heights Winery hosts a formal tasting.

The third master class was held at the Golan Heights Winery in Katzrin. There was a fascinating and in-depth presentation about the Golan Heights, followed by a tasting of wines from the Golan Heights. On the last day, a tasting of wines from the Negev was also held at Barkan Winery, Israel's largest winery, situated alongside Israel's largest vineyard. Again, each venue represented a different style of winery, again illustrating variety.

The open tastings were held at two of Israel's most beautiful wineries, Flam Winery at Eshtaol in the Judean Hills and Amphorae Vineyards, in Kerem Maharal in the foothills of Mount Carmel. At Flam Winery the wineries of the Judean and Shomron hills were invited to show their wines. The weather was good, allowing the winery tables to be strategically placed on the patio. It is a wonderful place to sit sipping wine overlooking vineyards, fruit trees, wild flowers and olive trees. It gives a very Mediterranean feel.

The second tasting was held at Amphorae, in a picturesque setting amongst olive trees, fig trees and persimmons. This time the tasting was in the winery itself, between the stainless-steel tanks, looking out towards the large and impressive-looking wooden cellar doors. There, wineries from the Golan Heights, Galilee and Mount Carmel regions showed their wares. The MWs had time in both settings to taste quietly and in their own time, and winemakers were able to present their wines without pressure of too many people needing attention at one time.

IN ADDITION to vineyard tours and wine tastings, some special lecturers were lined up to speak to the MWs. Yizhar Tugendhaft gave an interesting talk about olive oil and he also gave a tasting. The olive tree is so close to the grapevine in our ancient and modern history, it seemed wholly appropriate to include this partner of the vine in the program. Noam Reshef gave a lecture on his research on grape growing in the Negev. Israel has received great admiration worldwide for making the desert bloom, and desert viticulture is not that common, so it was an particularly interesting topic.

Finally, Dr. Shibi Drori explained his groundbreaking research on the Holy Land's indigenous varieties and also outlined their wine potential. Maybe one day, we will find out what King David drank! This was followed by a tasting of Dabouki, Jandali, Marawi (Hamdani) and Bittuni. The new Barkan Marawi, Cremisan Hamdani and Recanti Bittuni illustrated that these varieties are not only interesting, but that they can produce some good wines. The MWs were particularly interested in the research and the tasting of these wines. These lectures added value to the visit, offering some respite from visiting vineyards and wineries.

Arguably though, the most memorable part of the week, was seeing these honored guests squeezing in white suits, to visit the vine propagation block and vine nursery on the Golan Heights. They looked like something out of the Woody Allen film *Everything You*

*Always Wanted To Know About Sex * But Were Afraid to Ask*. The vineyards of Israel are plagued by virus due to years of mismanagement by the industry and government authorities responsible for the import of new plant material.

The extent of the crisis and the inability to resolve it over many years, has prompted the Golan Heights Winery to create this impressive facility to ensure that it has a clean, virus free source of plant material. This enormous investment, which should have been a government initiative, or at least have had substantial support from the Agriculture Ministry, has been undertaken by the Golan Heights Winery. It was very impressive and the majority of the MWs had never been to a nursery before, so it was particularly worthwhile.

Israeli wine people love to tell our story. No fewer than 50 Israeli wineries had wines tasted by the MWs, so it was great exposure. This Master of Wine visit gave us an opportunity to show the best of Israeli wine. As the Institute of Masters of Wine wrote to Daphna Sternfeld afterwards, "You now have lots of highly respected wine professionals who will always be great ambassadors for your wine."

Let's hope it will be the first of many such visits. Chapeaux to the Israel Export Institute! ■

The writer has advanced Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine.
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