



DUDI ZATZ & Asaf Ivanir, ex IBBLS, have founded Free Spirits importing craft spirits. (Photos: Free Spirits)

FREE-SPIRITED & HANDCRAFTED



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

I have been in Israel for 30 years. During that time we have seen a few metamorphoses of the spirits market.

The nineties was the decade for Israeli-produced brandies, spirits and liqueurs.

Israeli spirits were used in bars on any occasion a taste could be masked by a mixer or cocktail. Unscrupulous barmen no doubt filled the empty bottle of the famous brand of vodka on the back bar with the cheap Israeli version, and then charged the more expensive price.

There were names like Vodka Stopka, Captain Rum, Lord Gin, Tehila, Kapri from Carmel, Keglevich and Stock from Barkan, Elite, Alouf Arak and Gold Vodka. Of the eight largest wineries, each and every one produced spirits, except the Golan Heights Winery.

Israel was big on brandies, which was then mistakenly called Cognac in Israeli slang. Stock 84, 777, Extrafine and Grand Reserve were far more popular than whisky. However, only Elite Arak has really kept up with all the changes since then. It is the true survivor.

The 2000s were the years the large global brands came to Israel. For the first time Israelis could enjoy the same big brands they had come to know in New

York, Paris and London. Importers became firmly established, brand building took place, but still the most popular arena for purchases was Duty Free. Even bars and restaurants would try to buy what they wanted in Duty Free rather than paying the stratospheric prices of the importer.

Vodka consumption exploded, and everyone became infatuated with a new interest in whisky. If vodka was the spirit of choice for the young, whisky was the drink the feinschmecker liked to talk about. Everyone loved to say what their favorite malt was, as a sign of sophistication.

The 2010s were the decade of the democratization of the spirits market. Pricing came down due to tax and government intervention. The market became more accessible. Parallel imports destroyed the cozy, exclusive relationships importers had with their suppliers. There were more big brands in Israel than ever before. The rise of flavored spirits but still dominated by global brands became noticeable.

In Israel, 75% of the market was controlled by four large players. These were IBBLS, part of Coca Cola Israel, Tempo Beverages, Hacarem and Akerman. These companies carved up the global brands between themselves and often cajoled customers into taking their products.

IBBLS and Tempo in particular were able to provide

a total beverage service, supplying wines, spirits, beers and soft drinks.

WHEN YOU work in the drinks trade and you sit at a bar or restaurant, your eyes wander over the shelves as a matter of habit. You are checking out the big names, seeing what is new and looking for something different.

What quickly became apparent was that, whether a small bar or luxury restaurant, the back shelves look virtually the same everywhere. They are all toting the same brands from the same large distributors. After all, there is a saying that “Brands are Bland.” I mean by this that the larger brands tend to be less characterful, more parve, less likely to offend and more agreeable to a larger amount of people. In other words, bland!

Therefore, it is pleasing to find the new trend in Israel for the 2020s. Welcome to the craft distillery. This is artisan production on a small basis where the emphasis is on ingredients and authenticity. The global brand is more interested in the after production story, while the handcrafted delights in what goes on before the product is bottled.

In Israel this manifests itself in the number of craft distilleries that have opened. These include Golani, Jullius, Milk & Honey, Pelter and Yerushalmi. For



(FROM LEFT) Ocho Tequila, Mancino Vermouth, Appleton Rum.



those who demand “blue and white,” this provides an opportunity to return to local production.

The movement toward producing craft spirits has developed in the past decade worldwide. This followed the craft brewery revolution that happened previously in the decade before that. However, it is has arrived in Israel only now.

This is partly due to a new company called Free Spirits & Co. Using great knowledge and expertise, it has trawled the world to find craft spirits with unique character, great quality and a story. It has created its portfolio during COVID, of all years, to allow the better bars and restaurants to purchase out of the box to illustrate their excellence above their competitors. It gives more options that just did not exist before.

The two-man company is fortunate to have two gins of our business.

First is Asaf Ivanir, who really is a giant. Tall, patrician-looking, like a guardsman, with a broad, wide smile. He was CEO of IBBLs, the importers of Diageo and Campari. He is a proven marketing master, who has cleverly shepherded some of the world’s largest spirit brands, and also developed some totally new ones to Israel. He has many years’ experience in the drinks and beverage industry.

His partner is Dudi Zats, a 20-year veteran of the drinks industry, who is a master of what is in the bottle and how it is produced. For years he was involved in education about alcohol, spirits and liqueurs, and then he became business development manager for IBBLs, providing the knowledge, expertise and business smarts under Ivanir.

I don’t want to exaggerate, but if I had a question about any spirits, Zats is arguably the first person in the country I would approach. He is quiet, reserved, until he starts talking about his portfolio. Then you receive a tirade of information like a volcano. There is an overflow of knowledge and passion, and he has a story he is desperate to share. It is both charming and intoxicating. Sit quietly and listen, and you can’t help learning.

OUT OF their portfolio, of spirits, liqueurs, vermouths, bitters and cider, there are certain products that stand out.

First and foremost is their gin. This is a neutral spirit that has its predominant flavor from the juniper berry and other botanicals. It is most famous in the iconic gin and tonic. There has been an explosion of interest in gin, and this sector is a major beneficiary of the new craft artisan sector.

Gin aficionados will also be pleased to taste the Old Duff Genever, the traditional and unique Dutch gin, which is also part of their portfolio.

Tequila is also a growing market. This is fermented and distilled from the blue agave plant, grown near the city of Tequila in Mexico.

The Free Spirits Tequila Ocho really captures the essence of artisanal producer. This unique producer designates the year it is made and the precise field where the agave is harvested; and, of course, Ocho exclusively grows its own agave.

The word “*ocho*” means eight. Why the name? The producer has a slick answer. It takes an average of eight years for the agaves to ripen before being harvested. It takes eight kilograms of agave to make one liter of Ocho. The owner has eight siblings, and he is in his eighth decade of making tequila!

I like to sip a good Tequila neat from a brandy balloon, but I suppose it is most famous in the margarita cocktail.

Free Spirits also has a beautiful vermouth called Mancino.

A vermouth is an aromatized fortified wine, flavored with herbs and spices. We all know Martini and Cinzano, the giant global producers. We may remember the woeful Carmel and Stock vermouths of yore.

This is a highly individual expression made to recipe by Giancarlo Mancino. He uses 40 botanicals in the making of his vermouth, which are ground in a family mill in Piedmont. This is steeped in sugar beet spirit, then added to Trebbiano di Romagna, the base wine.

However, best for me is the Mancino Chinato Vermouth, made from Barbera d’Asti. The result is a beautiful expression of depth, richness and red wine complexity. A super-interesting digestive.

Most enchanting, if you can get it, is the beautifully packed Mancino Sakura, an Italian vermouth made in homage to the flowering of the cherry trees in Japan. Who knew vermouth could be so exquisite?

If there is an area of specialization, it is in the rum market. Rum is made by fermenting, then distilling, sugarcane molasses. This has been so dominated by Bacardi and Captain Morgan, and the lack of organization at source has delayed the rum turnaround.

However, with whisky reasonably saturated and at a peak, vodka maybe slightly in decline (admittedly from a very high percentage) and gin being the main beneficiary of the latest boom, maybe rum is next. The sheer variety of rum and the beauty of aged rum

Ivanir and Zats have snagged a good one. G’Vine is produced in the Cognac region. Its base product is the Ugni Blanc grape, and it is distilled in an alambic still (like a cognac.) It is far more floral, and less dominated by juniper than most London Dry Gins. Therefore, it is more complex. It would be particularly good for a martini cocktail.

is a potential market waiting to march forward.

Free Spirits definitely sees this, and it has some great rums.

The Hampden Estate Rum is produced in Jamaica. It is made in a pot still. It is aged in a tropical climate, which means more is lost to angel’s share (the evaporation of the spirit in cask) than is usual. The rum is intense, broad flavored with a flavorful spiciness.

Free Spirits also has Foursquare Rums from Barbados, and it is worth tasting some of its aged Appleton Rums.

As for me, though my first love is whisky, I start every meal in a restaurant with a Campari and soda. This is what Ivanir and Zats marketed with such amazing success at IBBLs.

However, never fear. As part of their new portfolio, they have Del Professore Bitter, which is similar to Campari, maybe slightly less bitter but more complex. One of the ingredients is rhubarb, which sounds intriguing.

As a Brit I love cider and can never understand why it is not popular here. It is made for a hot country like ours.

Their cider comes from Normandy and Brittany in northwest France, and it is called Galipette. It is made 100% from handpicked apples. There is no added sugar, it is gluten-free and vegan friendly. It is less gassy than some of the more commercial ciders. It comes in its own unique dumpy bottle. I could drink a great deal of this in Israel.

The philosophy of Free Spirits is to be small but act big. Certainly by focusing on artisan producers, it is giving a home for craft spirits producers in Israel. It is catering for those who want individuality, character, uniqueness and quality. At long last, there are new options for the quality restaurant bar and the innovative drinks cabinet at home. ■

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