



PRESERVING THE OLD AND ON WITH THE NEW

THE THREE musketeers representing the past and future of Agur Winery (from L): CEO Elad Katz, founder Shuki Yashuv & winemaker Eyal Drory. (Adam Montefiore)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Agur Winery is established, well known and appreciated by wine buffs. It has been around a while, but has recently been strengthened by two very significant additions to the team.

It was founded by Shuki Yashuv. In his previous world, he was a master carpenter specializing in making beautifully crafted cabinets. He is also an amateur historian, linguist, philosopher and a well-read intellectual. He brought his family to the Agur moshav from Jerusalem in 1987 and caught the wine bug really badly. In 1999 he opened a winery. It is the first place you see when you enter the moshav.

Agur Winery became one of the stalwarts of the Judean Hills wine region, earning a name for authenticity, individuality and quality. The artist winemaker was at play, and his wines were handcrafted no less than one of his cabinets.

The winery became kosher in 2007. It was one of the first of the smaller wineries, after Castel and Tzora, to realize it was worthwhile to make the change. It is always a difficult move for a hands-on winemaker. It is not that Yashuv saw the light; it was a decision based on economics, but it meant all Jews everywhere could enjoy his wines.

In a wine world that is standard, conservative and overly correct (I did not say boring!), Shuki became known by his personality, his outsize character and idiosyncrasies. He is a force of nature by any measure. Most will have met him for the first time at the winery.

Tastings hosted by him are rarely short, nor are

they just about wine. They are not a discussion, but more a presentation or a monologue. He speaks in a deep baritone voice coming from deep within, with the booming voice of a prophet. He is a storyteller, and his wines also tell a story. His ginger hair and beard, now receding and more white than ginger, only magnify the effect. If he were a wine, you would say he had great depth and layers of complexity. His tastings will likely veer from biblical and ancient Greek texts, through to modern-day philosophy and lifemanship. If you are lucky he may also remember to mention the wines.

His way is spiritual and deeply thought out. Even though he has the spontaneity of an artist, his wines are made consistently and with discipline. Yet his winemaking is more intuition and feel than following what should be done according to the textbooks.

He is fiercely supportive of the Judean Hills region and indeed is one of the pioneers. If wine is a product of a person and place, in this instance, this outsize personality plays a larger role than is usual. He is also poetic and romantic, and has said "When you taste Agur wine, you taste our soil, walk our hills, feel the wind and experience our culture."

HOWEVER, WINEMAKING is an energy-sapping routine that occurs year after year. At Agur Winery the blueprint has been created and the individuality is imprinted. The quality and style of the wines are known and respected. As the years pass, Shuki wanted the winery to advance on the foundations he had laid, but though he still has the passion, the energy was lacking.

Here entered Elad Katz, the knight on a shining

white horse. He is young, upright, good-looking, with tight black curly hair and a closely trimmed beard.

He previously worked in the Finance Ministry, for the Rothschild Foundation (Yad Hanadiv), and was the CEO of Domaine du Castel no less. Having left it in early 2020, he was looking to invest in wine and even considered creating a brand-new winery, but was drawn to Agur Winery by its position, its reputation and the immense potential. So he invested, became co-owner and the manager of the winery.

This was an enormous relief to Shuki, who is more artist than businessman. Elad is something else. That rare commodity: a professional manager with proven experience in the wine trade.

I knew him when he took his first baby steps in wine. He took the Wine Academy Course at Ramat Gan Academic College in 2009. My daughter Rachel was in the same course and I was a lecturer! Even then he seemed a really nice guy, but I had no idea that he would be drawn to our world. He was head of program management at Yad Hanadiv. It was not a wine job, but the Rothschild Foundation was created in memory of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, who founded the modern Israeli wine industry. So there was a connection of sorts, even if somewhat tenuous.

Then, in 2002, he joined Castel, being responsible for operations, sales and marketing. After eight years at Castel, he knows the wine business. Furthermore, his in-laws are owners of Moa Winery, one of the new interesting start-ups in the Negev.

IN AN inspired decision, Elad brought in Eyal Drory as his winemaking partner. This turn of events made Shuki very happy.

(FROM L) A mead flavored like a vermouth – another original creation from winemaker Drory; Agur's Rosa, Kessem and Layam.

(From L: Nadav Ariel; 3 wines: Agur Winery)



mead, which is a mead, made from honey, yet flavored like a vermouth. Very original! All are made from Israeli ingredients and botanicals and are of extremely high quality.

THE FIRST thing the new team did was plant a beautiful new vineyard, in Givat Yeshayahu, of varieties such as Syrah, Petite Sirah, Roussanne and Chenin Blanc. It was an impressive investment in the long term. This area has a microclimate that has a record for growing some pretty good wines. Buying flashy winery equipment has less effect on quality than ensuring good raw materials for the future. It showed a commitment and seriousness that bode well for the future.

Apart from long-term changes, there have been some immediate changes, too. The visitors center has been brightened up and tweaked, there are occasional events and there is a beautiful rustic garden where you can sit with your wine and cheese and enjoy the pastoral atmosphere and view.

As for the wines, the logo has been sharpened, the labels have been changed, but the wines are still beautifully individual expressions.

My favorites at this winery have always been the same, and this was again true in my last tasting. Kessem 2020 (magic in Hebrew) is an elegant, fresh and well-defined wine, made from Bordeaux varieties and Syrah. Layam 2019 is a Syrah Mourvedre blend which is fruity, chewy and smoky but not too big. It also has an original, characterful rosé called Rosa which is oak aged.

So the new dream team is in place. The founder, co-owner-manager and protégé winemaker will together take this diamond in the rough, shape it and polish it, as well as prepare the winery for the next decade. They will bank all the existing qualities and build for a successful future on the foundations laid by Shuki. It will certainly be a winery to follow in the next couple of years to see what they do.

I am sure if Shuki had dreamed of having new partners to take his baby forward, he could not have envisaged finding an investor-manager or winemaker more suited to the task. The proof will be in the pudding. We will be watching closely.

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. He is the wine writer of The Jerusalem Post. www.adammontefiore.com

Back in 2005, a young man took his first steps in the wine world. Eyal Drory decided he wanted to work on a farm in Italy, after a particularly memorable cider- and calvados-soused meal in Normandy, France. From this seminal event, he decided he wanted to live in the countryside and work in agriculture. After army service most Israelis plan on a big trip to South America or the Far East. Drory decided he would do his year on a farm in Italy. When he got the opportunity to work at a place that included a winery, he decided he had better get some experience in wine beforehand.

Through a family contact, he was put in touch with Yashuv, who without hesitating opened his arms and said: "Come!" He put him up and was his father figure, guide, teacher and inspiration.

Drory says: "Until today I need to give a lot of thanks to Shuki. I learned from him about wine, wine culture, history and so much more."

He stayed on the premises and assisted the winery owner-winemaker. He absorbed the passion and knowledge, which he put in his backpack for the future.

I first came across him when he worked at the Tapeo restaurant with my son David. This was an iconic restaurant in Tel Aviv, which was a production line for so many people who went on to become well-known in the hospitality and drinks industry.

Drory then went to live in Italy for six years. During this time he worked on a farm in the Frascati region, studied winemaking in Turin and spent a long time in the Alba region of Piedmont. He even received a

research scholarship for studies of the vine. He also managed to fit in a harvest in Crete.

When he returned, he became winemaker at Recanati Winery in Emek Hefer for two years, replacing Ido Lewinsohn MW, who was headhunted by Barkan. Then he joined Sea Horse at Bar Giora, to make wine with Zeev Dunie, another great character and an individualist also unfettered by norms and protocols.

By coincidence, the two Israeli mentors of Eyal Drory, Yashuv and Dunie, actually made wine together in 1998. The two entrepreneur artists were then starting their way in winemaking, which was initially a hobby but it soon turned into profession and brought them fame, even international recognition in their field.

Drory is a gentle artistic fellow, a dreamer with a passion for authenticity. He has his own worldview. He is regarded as one of the best young winemakers in Israel and is a brilliant catch by Elad Katz. Funnily enough, when Drory was first approached, Katz did not know about his original experience at Agur Winery. It meant the decision to entice him in was a slam dunk. It made each of the three partners very happy.

One of Eyal's personal babies is his vermouth. When he lived in Piedmont, he became fascinated with the artisan production of these aromatized fortified wines, and he has his own brand of vermouths and bitters called Vedetta 52, which he has created after five years of trials and experimentation. They are beautiful expressions of quality Israeli vermouth, something new to most people.

He also has recently launched David Jehonatan Ver-



THE AGUR Winery garden, a place to sit and sip in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility. (Agur Winery)

INVESTMENT IN the future: A new vineyard planted in Givat Yeshayahu. (Adam Montefiore)