



HANDMADE FRESH FIZZ

ANDREA BUFFA makes sparkling wines from his father-in-law's vineyard in Givat Yeshayahu. (Photos: Andrea Buffa)

THE BUFFA Sparkling Rose (inset) is totally original. Made uniquely from Petite Verdot. (Stav Katz)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Madame Lily Bollinger was once quoted as saying, "I drink Champagne when I am happy and when I am sad. Sometimes I drink it when I am alone. When I have company I consider it obligatory. I trifle with it if I am not hungry and drink it when I am. Otherwise, I never touch it – unless I am thirsty."

I was once invited to three days in the Champagne region of France, where we drank Champagne non-stop throughout a meal alongside every course and at every opportunity. Beforehand I was slightly skeptical of my staying power, thinking of acidity and bubble build up. I need not have feared. It was surprisingly easy. I discovered on that visit that Champagne goes with anything and everything, and may be enjoyed anytime. Madame Bollinger simply said it better than I can.

The Champagne magic was exported when the Champagne houses started investing in the New World. Today we live in a different world. Champagne Method sparkling wines – which outside Champagne we call the "Traditional Method" – are made all over. England is today one of the countries making superb sparkling wines. It is enough to make a Frenchman splutter into his Champagne.

Our own sparkling wine revolution took place in the early 1990s. The Golan Heights Winery sent young winemaker Victor Schoenfeld to learn the secrets of the Champenoise. He returned, put his newfound knowledge into practice and the winery won international recognition for its sparkling wines, in particular the iconic Yarden Blanc de Blancs. However,

the revolution was a one-stop shop.

Sparkling wine sales grew here, but it was mainly inexpensive wine with bubbles made by what I call the Coca-Cola method. Only the Golan Heights Winery was seriously into classic sparkling wines, though Pelter Winery also produced a cuvée in small quantities. Into this void came Dr. Andrea Buffa, an Italian who made his home in Israel with a yearning to return to sparkling wine, the love of his youth.

Andrea has the build of a standard lamp and the wiry look of a long-distance runner, which is also what he is. He has a mop of unruly hair that looks as though he has just been dragged through a hedge backwards. However, when he begins to talk, it is like opening a tap. Like a havdalah cup, he is overflowing with knowledge and enthusiasm in equal measure.

Andrea speaks very good English with that wonderful undulating Italian accent, but speaks slowly, considering his words carefully. Like a tsunami, however, he does not stop until he has finished his story, expressed his theory or given his opinion. The problem is that Andrea is frightfully smart, highly intelligent and obviously a first-rate chemist. When I looked up what he had done or studied, I found even the brief summary descriptions impossible to understand.

However, Andrea is also a wine lover, an enthusiast, an educator and a philosopher who loves sharing. He also has the ability to make the complicated simple. His contribution to the innovative, wine-education website WineFolly.com ("Some Nifty Science to Help You Identify Wine Aromas") is an example. So he is always interesting, and as you listen to him, you can't help but learn something. Oh, and I also forgot, he is an amazing winemaker, making unique wines that are totally individual expressions.

I RECENTLY WROTE an article mentioning the hidden talents here making miniscule quantities of wine. I wanted to add Andrea to the article, but I had not met him yet. Therefore, recently I drove to the Givat Yeshayahu Moshav and sat under a vine pergola next to an old wine press to converse with him for the first time. Before me was the imposing family house of his in-laws. On one side was a small cottage where Andrea lives with his wife, and on the other was the wine factory, which had all the grandeur of a garden shed. We drank strong black coffee – he is Italian after all – and talked.

Here he makes handmade, traditional method sparkling wine, and when I say by hand, I mean he does everything himself. He is the ultimate artisan. If the other wineries I mentioned were miniscule, this is a mini-miniscule. He aims for 3,000 bottles, dreams of one day making 30,000 bottles but in 2021, only made 1,600 bottles.

LET'S GO BACK to the beginning. Andrea is from Piedmont in northern Italy. If Tuscany is the Bordeaux of Italy, Piedmont is the Burgundy, famous for Barolo and Barbaresco. Andrea is from the beautiful Asti region, more known for Barbera, Asti Spumante and Moscato. Alongside being an industrial chemist, he made wine, absorbing the culture and atmosphere of the region like a person does when he grows up among wine people. He has made wine since 2001. His own particular fetish was always sparkling wines, even then. The tactile feel of the heavy, differently shaped bottle, the ceremony of the opening procedure and that unique yeasty, bread crust and buttery aroma were among his earliest memories of wine.

His life took a turn in 2012, when he met his future wife, the beautifully named Arava, in Italy. She was



ANDREA CAUGHT mid-harvest, handpicking the grapes. (Stav Katz)



BUFFA PINOTAGE Blanc de Noir (L) and Petit Verdot Rose.

in Turin to study Italian. This changed his life. She persuaded him to return to Israel with her in 2014. True love has no borders. Here, slightly bored with being an industrial chemist, he wanted to do something that challenged him, where he could continue to learn. So he decided to pursue a PhD in chemistry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Fortunately for us, he missed wine, which ran like a thread through his life.

By chance, Andrea settled in the Judean Hills, one of our finest regions. By coincidence, his in-laws, the "Israel" family, were growers with established vineyards. Israel is a bit hotter than the edgy weather of Northern Italy, but it is a place reeking with history. They were making wine here long before the vine reached Italy. So it was a place with its charms... and challenges.

He saw the lack of quality sparkling wines made in Israel. He remembered his youthful fascination with sparkling wines. The only problem was that the family vineyards were primarily Bordeaux varieties. However, Andrea is nothing if not original and practical. In 2015, bursting with unfulfilled wine curiosity, bubbling with unused knowledge and remembering that unique aroma of his youth, he decided to make some traditional method sparkling wines. He also chose two of the varieties fate had served him on a platter: Pinotage and Petit Verdot. He would make use of what he had.

The Pinotage turned out to be a Blanc de Noir. Literally, a white wine made from black grapes. Pinotage is a South African variety, which is a cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsault that was created by Abraham Izak Perold. The Petit Verdot was made into a sparkling rose. Petit Verdot is a Bordeaux grape that often does not ripen there. There are no such prob-

lems here, where it has proved to be an important blender. However, to my knowledge, it has never been used to make sparkling wines! In a nod to conformity, Andrea also bought in Chardonnay from the moshav to make a Blanc de Blancs.

EACH WINE is laboriously made by hand. The secret of the traditional method is that the second fermentation takes place in the actual bottle in which it is sold. The wines rest on their tirage yeast for a minimum of 12 months. In fact, it is often longer, because Andrea only disgorges the wine when he has an order.

The yeast is moved down the bottle by riddling or remuage as the bottle is gently turned in a wine rack, known as pupitre, until a plug of yeast sits on the crown top stopper. Then it can be removed, topped up and corked. All this is mechanized today but Andrea does it by hand. If you have ever tried putting a champagne cork into a bottle of sparkling wine, you will understand this is hard work.

In his words, the three wines cover a spectrum. The Pinotage Blanc de Noir Brut is more delicate and the perfect aperitif. The Chardonnay Blanc de Blancs Brut is more buttery and suitable with fish in a butter or cream sauce. The Petit Verdot Rose Brut is more characterful and will match with smoked fish, smoked salmon. And when Andrea explained how perfect the match is with lightly cooked, pink lamb chops, his eyes almost glazed over. I became hungry just listening to him!

My favorite was the Petit Verdot Rosé. When I described it as rough, Andrea thought I was dissing it, so maybe rustic is a better word. It is bold, slightly tannic, flavorful and different from any sparkling wine I have tasted.

The wines retail for NIS 120, which is inexpensive for an artisan, handmade product of this quality. However, he recoils when I say this. The reason is that he is thinking of prices in Italy in euros. How could he charge an over-the-top price? How would he explain it to his friends at home?

Uniquely, the bottle number and date of disgorgement are handwritten on each label. Brut is the standard, but because he only disgorges the wine to order, he offers the opportunity for each wine to be Brut Nature (bone dry), Extra Brut (very dry) or Brut (dry). Each customer may make their own choice. The wines are snapped up by groupies, whether by restaurants or private buyers.

Andrea is no longer alone in his specialty. A number of wineries with creative winemakers are making base wines for future traditional method sparkling wines. Andrea is the first of the new wave, but not the last. As a result, we are about to enter a new era of quality sparkling wines in Israel.

People have different customs in drinking Champagne. The French like it young, whereas the British prefer it with some bottle age. Andrea believes that good sparkling wines show different qualities, whichever one you choose. However, you would be hard-pressed to find a fresher expression of the sparkling winemaker's art than his.

There is an apocryphal story of the Benedictine monk Dom Perignon, who upon discovering Champagne called out, "Come quickly! I think I am drinking stars!" I felt a similar sense of exhilaration when I first tasted Andrea's handmade fresh fizz. ■

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