

A MAN, A PLACE AND HIS WINE



ALON AND Yogev Zadok, who are father and son, plant a vineyard for Ramat Negev Winery.



FOUR WINES produced in the Negev Desert.



ERAN RAZ is the passionate wine grower of Nana Vineyard.



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The Negev Desert in ancient times was a wine center of some repute. In the days of the First Temple, there were sparse Jewish populations there. As Jews have done throughout history, they also made wine. A pottery shard recently found at the military garrison of Tel Arad conveyed the important message, “If there is wine, send quantity.” This was dated 2,600 years ago!

Wine was needed for refreshment. It was in demand for the thirsty, as it was safer to drink than the water, which carried diseases. Wine had status. It was used for medicinal purposes, for dyeing, and it was a useful source of nutrients and calories. It was also a valuable currency. However, the peak of winemaking in the Negev was not at the hands of Jewish winemakers. It was the Nabataeans who tamed the desert.

The Nabataeans were Arab nomads who really opened the wine trade in the Negev during Roman times. Why in the Negev? Because that was where the Nabataeans were free to roam unchallenged. Why wine? It was simply good business. Their settlements were strategically positioned along the spice route. Travelers, smugglers and traders were good customers. Vineyards were watered by storing water in cisterns and channeling it through terraces.

Wine was made in rudimentary limestone basins where grapes were pressed by being trodden on and the juice fermented. The resulting wine was stored in cool caves in amphora, clay vessels with large handles

and a pointed base. The wine trade became still more commercial with the Byzantines, who capitalized on the Nabataeans’ initiative by creative, large commercial wine presses. Remains of an advanced wine trade may still be seen at Avdat and Shivta.

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, was painfully aware that half the country was desert and he had a dream that Israel would make it bloom. He backed this up by personal example. He had worked at Rishon Lezion Cellars (Carmel) in 1907. Appropriately, the first vineyard in the Negev in modern times was planted by Carmel adjacent to Tel Arad in 1988. I remember the interest in the first Merlot released from the 1992 vintage. Carmel sold its Negev wines under the brand name Ramat Arad.

Yatir Winery was founded in 2000 and its first wines were released in 2004. Most of the wines were from the high elevation Yatir Forest, the southern tip of the Judean Hills. Ben-Gurion had implored the experts to plant a forest at this meeting place between the Judean Hills, Judean Desert and Negev in order to prevent expansion of the desert. The experts told him it was impossible, so Ben-Gurion retorted, “Well, change the experts!”

The forest was planted in 1964, and today Yatir Forest is the largest planted forest in Israel, and has proved to be a great wine-growing *terroir*. An early Yatir Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc came from the Ramat Arad vineyard. These days, all Yatir wines are from the forest, but the wine is still situated in the Negev and it remains the quality winery of southern Israel. No doubt its success drew attention to the Negev.

IN THE late 1990s, the first vineyard was planted in Mitzpe Ramon, and in typical innovative Israeli fashion, brackish water was used from deep wells to irrigate the vines, along with treated sewage from the local army base. The first grapes were a symbol of what could be achieved. Most were swallowed up by Barkan Winery.

These days, two wineries fly the flag: Ramat Negev Winery and Midbar Winery. Their names give a clue: “Ramat Negev” (or Negev Highlands) is the high-elevation part of the Negev where wine vineyards thrive and *midbar* is Hebrew for desert. The Zadok family planted their first vineyard in 1996 in Kadesh Barnea and founded a winery in 2000. Their Ramat Negev Winery is today the largest winery pushing Negev wines. It is truly a family winery. Alon, son of the founder, studied in Florence and is now the winemaker. My favorite wine of theirs is the Ramon Petit Verdot. The Midbar Winery is situated in Arad. “Wine in the desert is what we do” is their slogan. They produce a very good Viognier.

In the early 2000s, some local farms and wineries created the first Negev wine route, encouraging tourists to visit and enjoy the produce of this desert area.

Now there are new Mitzpe Ramon vineyards, source of the finest grapes from the Negev, where they grow wine, not just grapes. I decided to visit. There I was met by Eran Raz, thin and wiry, with salt-and-pepper hair and a determined jutting chin. He had experience working in Golan Heights vineyards and with the Ella Valley Winery, but got the urge to move to the desert.

He walked the land, and found a spot to plant his vineyard. He conquered the bureaucracy of the authorities, the hostility of his new Bedouin neighbors and the lack

of essential facilities to support the vineyard – water, for instance. He ordered the vines before making provision for water with the zeal of someone who would not be denied, and planted his vineyard in 2007.

A combination of idealism, professionalism, almost missionary zeal and dogged determination saw him through. He had to divert water from a nearby community, watering at night so as not to bother and deprive others. He received complaints that people in the nearby guest house would occasionally be left covered in soap and unable to rinse, unbeknown to them because their precious water was being used for a higher cause – to irrigate some parched vines.

Then he had to cope with some unsavory locals who did not like the fact that he was planting a vineyard “on their patch.” Raz had to sleep in the vineyard to protect the vines and equipment from being damaged or stolen. The deepest love affair between two people is usually honed by a shared experience. Probably the connection between this man and his vineyard was forged simply because they went through so much together. Or maybe it was the support of his wife, Shahar, his six children and the family dogs that enabled him to see it through.

WHEN I arrived at Nahal Zin in Mitzpe Ramon I was confronted with a narrow green river of beautifully manicured vineyards. Eran Raz, showing unselfish leadership, has guided other families to also plant in the same strip. The carpet of green within the harsh brown sandy unforgiving desert will give you the chills. Today the 100 hectares of vineyards provide

a pastoral scene, incongruous with the barren, arid backdrop, military bases and firing ranges nearby.

Raz sells his grapes to wineries eager to purchase his fruit, but the best he keeps for his Nana Winery. “Nana” was his nickname from when he was about 10 years old. There is a slight disconnect between the raw authenticity of the place and the pretentious look of the bottles. However, I particularly enjoyed the minerally flavorful Chenin Blanc with great acidity. The Syrah was average, but not that special.

There is a sukka by the vineyard for contemplating the view and absorbing the atmosphere with a glass in hand. Eran will say, “I may not make the best wine in the world, but without doubt I make the best wine in the world to drink by this vineyard.” So profound and true.

No doubt a wine tastes special in the winery in which it is made, but the experience is on a higher plane when you drink a wine in a vineyard where its grapes were grown! For this ultimate wine experience in a unique place, you have to visit, glass in hand.

The soil is mainly loess, ancient wind-blown sediment. The elevation is 800 meters above sea level. Temperatures vary between baking hot days and very cold nights. There is virtually no humidity and little other vegetation, so there is a lack of diseases and pests that attack vines. There are constant winds that funnel through the carpet of vineyards and aerate the vines. Most damage is caused by marauding camels, who eat a vine like a salad, downing the roots and causing irreparable damage. Sometimes the local Bedouin are careless about controlling their camels, either to in-

timidate the farmers they see as intruders or simply because they just do not care.

Nir Shaham of the Soreq Winemaking School was the matchmaker. When I interviewed him a few years ago, he told me about the unique Three Corners project initiated by Niv and Karen Benyehuda, making wine in California, Costa Rica and Israel. I hear many fantasies and dreams, but though I am always encouraging, I have learned through experience to be skeptical. I even left it out of the article I wrote. Now, sure enough, Three Corners has come to fruition and through Shaham, Eran Raz’s wine became the Israeli leg of this three-legged horse.

Niv Benyehuda is now getting together with Raz to build a brand-new state-of-the-art winery. The world-renowned Kerry Damskey from California is the master winemaker, and Dana Berry, a protégé of his, will be the resident winemaker. As for Eran Raz, he will remain the viticulturist in this new dream team and continue to do what is important for him, which is grow wine and care for his vineyard. They say “Fortune Favors the Brave” (which was my school motto. It sounds even better in Latin!)

The new Nana Winery is now being built on the main road, however, visitors will continue to be encouraged to make the effort to drive to the vineyards and taste among the vines. There you will find the essence of this wine trade: A person, a place and his wine. ■

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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