

The advocate



'A WINE epicenter that includes countries like Greece, Israel and Lebanon might look familiar to someone a couple of thousand years old, but it is certainly a new part of the wine world for the rest of us.' (Pictured: Santorini, by Mark Squires)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Robert Parker, a young, humble lawyer from Monkton, Maryland, was a wine lover. He began tasting wines, writing tasting notes and publishing them for a small database of followers. No different to many wine bloggers today. He called his newsletter *The Wine Advocate*. That was in the late 1970s. He became the most powerful and influential critic the wine world has ever seen.

He received his big breakthrough with the 1982 vintage of Bordeaux. Many frowned at the quality of the wines that year. However, Parker, bristling with confidence in his tasting ability, stood firm that it was one of the great vintages. When he was proved right, the legend was born.

He saw himself as an honest, crusading critic representing what was in the glass, breaking through the waffle exhibited by the pinstripe-suited and tweed jacket brigade of mainly British experts at the time.

He worked very hard, had a phenomenal palate and indestructible memory. These combined with the needs of the time to create an aura of invincibility. He introduced the 100-point score, which has been adopted almost worldwide. As a wine writer, I don't like scores for wines. I think it is too finite for an art form that is constantly changing. However as a veteran of

the wine trade, I soon change my view. A good score and I am crowing as much as anyone. As for the consumers, they loved it. It made things so much simpler. A score of 90 points could make a wine, with it selling out within weeks. A score of 89, and it would continue to languish on the shelves. Some wineries even adapted how they made wine in an attempt to achieve a higher score. That was the measure of this man's influence on wine in the last 30 years.

In the mid-1990s I worked for the Golan Heights Winery, and thought it was strange that he had not tasted Israeli wines. I thought complacently, that if he tasted any, he should start with Yarden.

So, no fewer than four times I sent wines to him for tasting. The first two times, I heard nothing more. Israel was just not on the horizon in the mid-'90s. The third time I sent the wines, I telephoned to check they had arrived. The phone rang and at the other end someone answered, "Robert Parker speaking." The great man himself answered. Still though, the wines were not tasted or at least the scores or tasting notes were not published anywhere.

The fourth time, the Golan Heights representative in the US, who was then Brad Haskell, tasted the wines with Pierre Rovani, then Parker's assistant. He was courteous, complimentary, and our hopes were high, but nothing came out of it.

Roll on to 2007, a pusher named Hezi Levy from Chica-

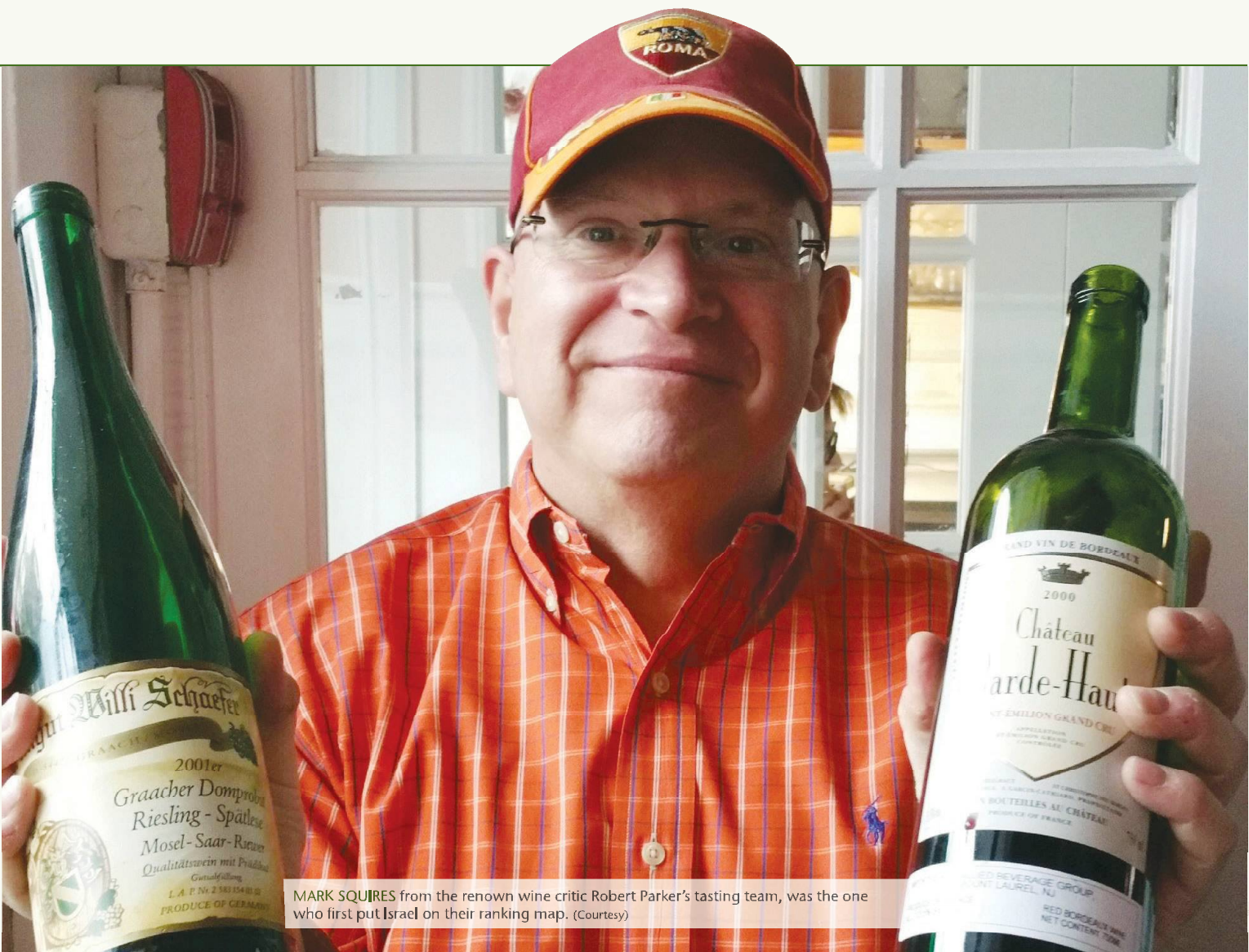
go met Parker at some event, and bemoaned the fact that Israeli wines had never been scored. Parker gave a commitment that he would arrange a tasting and he gave the job to Mark Squires, one of his elite tasting team.

The results are history. Squires tasted approximately 100 wines. The tasting was published in the *Wine Advocate* of December 2007. Yatir Forest then became the first Israeli, Eastern Mediterranean or kosher wine to score 93 points. It created a great deal of excitement in Israeli wine circles. By then I was working for Yatir Winery, and without doubt this score made the winery's name.

When Robert Parker's *7th Wine Buyer's Guide* was published, Israel was an impressive newcomer with nine pages, the same space that New Zealand received, and more than South Africa.

Squires goes further back with Parker than everyone else in his tasting team. He actually met Parker more than 25 years ago on the Prodigy wine forum, where he was the board leader and Parker was the paid expert. When that collapsed, Squires started his own site. Later, when Parker started his own, he invited Squires to bring his forum on board in 2001.

The chat forum was always fun, informative and piquant. Squires often received a tough press for this, but it was an impossible job and he managed it very well as social media changed, developed and became more independent and opinionated. Then in 2006,



MARK SQUIRES from the renown wine critic Robert Parker's tasting team, was the one who first put Israel on their ranking map. (Courtesy)

Squires was brought into the tasting team. He became responsible for Israel, Greece, Lebanon and Portugal, amongst other countries.

Squires lives in Philadelphia. He was also a lawyer, who became enchanted with wine, which took over his life. Bald, bespectacled, with a round, genial and generous face, he is sharp witted, fiercely intelligent and does not suffer fools gladly. He has a personality beyond wine though. He can talk just as passionately about politics, history or photography.

He visited Israel and toured the wineries, saw the whites of the eyes of the winemakers, and the differences between the various regions. I hosted him at Carmel Winery at Zichron Ya'acov and Yatir Winery at Tel Arad. Originally there was to be one tasting of Israeli wines a year, but this very soon became more because of the number of wines he received. From 2007 until today that has been a lot of wines!

I will say two things to Squires's credit. Firstly his tasting notes are beautifully written and you really feel when reading them that you get into the essence of the wine. Secondly he is one of the very few critics who tastes over a couple of days. Indeed the Yatir wine that did so well achieved that score only because it had improved so much the next day. I remember seeing a film of the legendary English wine expert Michael Broadbent MW, of *Decanter* and Christie's fame, tasting with a stopwatch in front of him and returning to

a wine every half hour. Well whereas most wines are tasted (and scored) with a sniff and *shluk* (Israeli slang for a taste), before hurriedly moving onto the next one, it seems wholly appropriate to give this complicated beverage time to show itself.

By the sheer weight and regularity of tastings, Squires must be arguably the No. 1 expert on Israeli wines today. We no longer have our own Daniel Rogov, the critic who died before his time in 2011. Though there are Israeli guides, and even a wine journalist who boldly announced "I am stepping into Rogov's shoes," none has yet the international credibility or gravitas to create a standard by which consumers and wineries can check themselves. (And the person who crowned himself the new Rogov no longer writes about wine!)

There are other magazines that taste Israeli wine, but these are not close to the number of wines Squires tastes in a year. Usually the results of their tastings are published just before the holidays emphasizing the kosher niche where Israeli wine is embedded, particularly in America.

Of course the Robert Parker brand is the one known even though there is a team of experts who taste most of the wines these days. So even if it is Squires tasting the wine, wineries invariably put the letters RP and the score on shelf talkers in wine stores. Of course Robert Parker is the brand that sells, though it would be fairer and more honest to admit the tasting was by Squires

on behalf of *Robert Parker's Wine Advocate*.

So what does Squires think about Israeli wine? He has written: "The corner has clearly been turned qualitatively. Israel has a real wine industry that deserves consumer attention. There are attractive wines with typicity and some distinction... Many are classic and charming and the best will impress anyone."

As a fervent campaigner that Israel is part of the Eastern Mediterranean, I loved his quote: "A wine epicenter that includes countries like Greece, Israel and Lebanon might look familiar to someone a couple of thousand years old, but it is certainly a new part of the wine world for the rest of us." It makes clear that Israel is not part of the new or old world of winemaking, but is part of the ancient world.

In the last 10 years three Israeli wines have top scored at 94 points. They are the Alexander Amarolo 2011, Clos de Gat Syra Muscat 2006 and Castel Grand Vin 2013. A further eight wines have scored 93 points (Castel and Margalit wines twice each; and one each made by Alexander, Flam, Yarden and Yatir). Let's hope that Mark Squires and *Robert Parker's Wine Advocate* will continue to taste Israeli wine. Who knows? We may even one day break the glass ceiling and receive 95 points! ■

Adam Montefiore has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is known as "the ambassador of Israeli wine" and the "English voice of Israeli wine."