



THE MUSCAT grape used in Moscato is grown on the beautiful hilly region of Asti, in Piedmont. (Photos: Courtesy)



ICONIC WINE
in its iconic
blue bottle.

BARTENURA MADNESS



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

In the 2000s, Moscato took off in Israel and particularly in America, where the phenomenon became known as Moscato madness. What was the attraction? Simply it was low alcohol, sweet, slightly sparkling, with aromas of peaches and pears, a full grapey flavor, in a light frothy way... and most important, it was tasty! More and more wineries produced it, usually producing it from the Muscat of Alexandria grape, which made a comeback at the same time that other sweet or dessert wines were in decline.

Muscat of Alexandria is one of the oldest of all varieties, indigenous to the southern and eastern Mediterranean. The

best-quality muscat though, with a more refined, less blowsy aroma, is the Muscat de Frontignan or Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains. This was known as Muscat Canelli in Italy, where the style of Moscato wine had its origin. The Golan Heights Winery was the first winery to plant Muscat Canelli in Israel, and their Moscato produced in the late 1990s preceded the boom. Even before that, an imported wine from Italy was produced, called Bartenura Moscato.

The area of the world where this style of wine came to be best known, is in the Asti region of Piedmont, in northeast Italy. They are famous for two wines in a similar genre. One is closer to a sparkling wine, the other to a dessert wine. Asti Spumante, or Asti for short, is a sweetish, sparkling wine made from muscat grapes, at a minimum of 9% alcohol, with a bulbous sparkling wine cork and a protective wire cap



CLAUDIO MANERA, CEO of Araldico and producer of Bartenura.

BELOW: ARALDICO is a winery with modern equipment that also remembers its heritage.

to keep it in place. In other words, it looks like a sparkling wine. Moscato d'Asti is frizzante, which means lightly sparkling. It normally comes with a regular cork, is sweeter and is classified as a dessert wine, but is low alcohol, usually between 5% to 6%, closer to the alcohol of a beer than a wine. Some do not classify it as a wine, because the alcohol is too low, but they do in Asti, which is good enough for me.

WHEN THE Royal Wine Company, the pioneer of quality kosher wine worldwide, first decided to delve into dry kosher wines, they chose to go to Italy rather than to France, and one of their first international brands was Bartenura, named after a 15th century Italian rabbi. Rabbi Ovadia ben Avraham of Bertinoro was a commentator on the Mishnah, became the rabbi of Bertinoro, a town in the province of Forli and he was known as "The Bartenura." To make a Moscato was an obvious thing to do. Its sweetness, low alcohol and easy drinking nature would surely appeal to the Jewish consumer, who was still wedded to sweet wines.

In 1992, Royal decided to put their Moscato in a blue bottle. This caused all sorts of problems for the producer, because blue was not a bottle color approved by the authorities in this particular region. However, they stuck with it, even though it would have been easier to conform. In 1997, another famous wine brand, Blue Nun, also decided to put their wine in a blue bottle. Today, the blue bottle has become a talisman and is copied all over the world, but those two pioneers became legends. Bartenura Moscato became the largest-selling wine in the kosher sector (not including kiddush wines like Manischewitz), the largest-selling Italian Moscato in the United States and the largest-selling imported Moscato from anywhere. Blue Nun, then in decline worldwide, became the largest-selling brand in Israel. Bartenura Moscato is a five-million-bottle brand, and Blue Nun is a two-million-bottle brand in Israel. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The idea of using blue bottles is spreading like a rash.

The Bartenura and Moscato boom took off. It was brought home to me when I visited a supermarket in California and saw two Moscatos sitting side by side on the shelf. One was Barefoot Moscato, owned by Gallo, the largest winery in the world, and the other was Bartenura Moscato in its iconic blue attire. The kosher category was nowhere to be seen.

So Bartenura dominated kosher, transcended it moving into the general market and then led the category. The reason was the quality of the product. It is authen-



tic, tastes as it should and is a signpost of exactly what Moscato should represent. Secondly, the product was brilliantly marketed and positioned astutely by the Herzog family. Finally, there were also hefty junks of luck. Bartenura Moscato rode on the crest of the wave of the new interest in this style of wine. Then, it was uniquely adopted by famous rappers and the young, trendy hip hop crowd, who gave the wine good advertising and credibility well outside the confines of the restricted kosher market. The taste, look and image were exactly right.

To the Jewish community, Bartenura ticks all the boxes. There are still many that make kiddush mixing grape juice and Kiddush wine. A Moscato is a pretty good alternative for a ritual wine to be shared by all the family. It won't satisfy those who traditionally prefer red, but everyone will like it, especially the great aunt who hates wine! Funnily enough, when I was visiting Siena in Tuscany recently, I visited the old synagogue. There on a wall plaque was a mention of various Moscatos. While I was busy contemplating which Moscato this referred to, I was told that the name referred to various members of the Moscato family and that it was a well-known Jewish name, particularly in the Rome community. A coincidence, but even in name, as well as style, it is the perfect match.

Moscato may be drunk literally anywhere, any time. It may be enjoyed at breakfast, brunch, or as an aperitif. It is perfect with spicy Asian food, as a dessert wine to accompany light fruit-based desserts or with cheese. It is probably at its best as an informal party wine. It should be served ice cold, even put it in the freezer for a short time – but don't forget it there. You can serve it either in a flute or tulip glass, or in a regular white wine

glass. This is a wine that reminds me that wine is meant to be fun, informal and tasty. Just because the wine intelligentsia frown on it, does not mean that real people, who actually drink wine rather than talk about it, are forbidden to enjoy it. In America, it has become trendy to drink Moscato, and Bartenura is on top of the pile. The next development is that it is now available in cans, which will make it even more accessible.

ROYAL WINE Corp makes kosher wine all over the world. As a rule, particularly in Europe and the southern hemisphere, they create their own brands and use a surrogate winery for making the wines, but like the surrogate mother, these are not always publicized. For me, I like to know who the partners are, because it greatly adds to the credibility of the product.

I decided to investigate the winery that produces the Bartenura wines in Piedmont, including the best-selling Moscato. It is called Araldica Castelvero and is situated at Castel Boglione, in the province of Asti, in the southeastern part of Piedmont. Piedmont is most famous for its Barolo and Barbaresco, but Asti is better known for its Spumante and Barbera.

Araldica is a cooperative founded in 1954. It is one of the largest wineries in Piedmont, producing 15 million bottles year. They produce all kinds of wines but specialize in Barbera, Gavi, Asti and Moscato. They farm 900 hectares of vineyards covering Monferrato, Lange and Roero and have 140 partner growers. The vineyards are sustainable, which is quite an achievement in bringing all the growers on board. Araldica produces a further 10 million bottles sourced from outside the region – 25 million bottles and their largest brand is Bartenura!

Despite it being a cooperative (like Carmel was until 2013), it is a kind of family affair, too. Since 1991, the CEO has been Claudio Manera, who used to be the winemaker. His father, Livia Manera, was CEO before him and his wife Lella shares the winemaking duties. They make wines that are accessible, reasonably priced and have good typicity. They are consistent using state-of-the-art technology, efficient and professional, which is why they supply so many of the major supermarket chains.

When Royal Wine selected them as partners, it was a good choice. Apart from the all-conquering Moscato, they also produce a very good kosher Pinot Grigio, Prosecco and Asti under the Bartenura label.

Royal Wine and Araldica began their cooperation when Bartenura was a niche brand solely for the kosher market and Moscato was just another style of a sweetish wines to go with all the others. Their Muscat Canelli is grown on those beautiful hilly sloped vineyards, and the wine is produced in specially strengthened and domed stainless steel tanks that maintain the fragrance and trap the natural gas from the fermentation. Royal took the wine to market and Moscato Madness became Bartenura Madness. Today Bartenura Moscato looks well past the Jewish market and it has become an icon representing the Moscato d'Asti style to the world. ■

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