



Celebrating SYRAH



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

THROUGHOUT ISRAEL, the vine and olive tree grow together, as can be seen in the Upper Galilee. (Carmel Winery)

Hanukkah approaches to signpost the winter months, and just the thought of it makes me feel like a glass of hearty red wine.

Hanukkah is just about the only Jewish festival without an obvious wine connection. Drinking wine is an integral part of Purim and Passover. At Purim we have to drink enough so as not to be able to distinguish between the phrases “Blessed be Mordechai” and “Cursed be Haman.” At Passover, which is nothing short of a wine banquet, we have to drink *arba kossot* (four cups of wine). Shavuot has almost become “the” white wine festival. Rosh Hashanah is a time for sweet dessert wines to give hope of a sweet year and Sukkot is the wine harvest festival.

Hanukkah has no direct connection with wine. It was a repudiation of Hellenism and a triumph of the Jewish spirit, however a rejection of Greek culture was not a rejection of wine as such, though the Jewish sages did build a defensive wall around wine to avoid wanton use of this powerful and influential beverage. The festival of Hanukkah is centered around olive oil, so pick a good one. Sindyanna of Galilee is a joint venture between Israeli Arab and Jewish women, with the colorful labels designed by their children. Their extra

virgin olive oils win awards internationally. There is a both a quality product and a good cause.

The vine is the partner of the olive tree as one of the seven blessed species. They go hand in hand in Biblical narratives then and exist throughout the Mediterranean now. Nowhere is this more the case than in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thucydides even wrote that man became civilized when he learned to cultivate the vine and olive tree. At Hanukkah it is therefore hard to give pride of place to olive oil, without its twin, wine, being involved at all. So, I believe wine should certainly be part of the celebration.

NO DOUBT the wine that goes best with potato latkes is a sauvignon blanc or a dry white with good acidity. A sparkling wine would also fit the bill. As for doughnuts, maybe a frothy, sweet Moscato is the best bet. On the other hand, a meal at home is not a pretentious, formal dinner party and you don’t have to match a different wine to every single thing you eat. As the festival lasts eight days, there is an opportunity to pick a subject or theme. I want to take the opportunity to focus on a red wine suitable for December, but which? Cabernet Sauvignon, our most planted variety, is everywhere. Easily accessible and well known. Possibly too much so. It is too familiar. Next, I thought about the variety Israel adopted 150 years ago, Carignan. However, this is still considered esoteric to most regular wine drinkers. Then if we look

at the rarity of an Israeli variety like Argaman, the problem is that there are too few producers.

So, I have settled on Syrah. This is a grape variety that came to Israel relatively late, only in the last 25 years. It is symbolic of the current trend toward Mediterranean varieties here. Whereas King Cabernet requires high elevation to be shown at its best, Syrah seems to grow well everywhere in Israel. I think it could almost be regarded as the single variety that most symbolizes the Eastern Mediterranean, crossing boundaries and performing well everywhere. To prove my point, consider Domaine Vlassides Shiraz from Cyprus, Gerovassiliou Winery Syrah from Greece, Domaine des Tourelles Syrah du Liban from Lebanon and Kavaklidere Winery Pendore Syrah from Turkey.

In fact, the Syrah variety is more commonly referred to as Shiraz in Israel. It sings best in two very different places in the world. In the Rhone Valley and Northern Rhone, it is known as Syrah. The wines of Hermitage and Cote Rotie are the most famous expressions of the variety in the Northern Rhone. In the Southern Rhone, Syrah is part of the Chateaufort du Pape blend, but normally has a supporting role to Grenache. In Australia it is known as Shiraz. Penfolds Grange and Henschke’s Hills of Grace are arguably the most well-known Australian expressions. In Israel, wineries tend to refer to wines made from the French clone as Syrah and the Australian clone as Shiraz. It may just as easily simply be a choice by the



SOME OF the best examples of Israeli Syrah (from left): Tulip Winery, Nana Winery, Chateau Golan, Clos de Gat, Segal Winery. (Photos: Wineries mentioned)

marketers. Syrah sounds more regal and noble to the wine attuned ear, and Shiraz sounds more fun and flavorful.

The roots of this variety are subject to the usual folklore, which connects its beginnings to the Eastern Med and Middle East. Pliny the Elder referred to Syriaca, which may have been an ancestor of Syrah. Greater Syria once included the Levant, and it is hard not to notice the similarity in the words Syria and Syrah. Others note that there was a town in Persia, called Shiraz. To those who follow either of these ideas, the variety would have then been transported to Europe either by the Phoenicians or later by the Crusaders. You should not spoil a good story by the truth; unfortunately, the science does really back up these hypotheses. Less romantic, but more realistically, the vine most probably began its life in France.

Strangely, Syrah was a late arrival in Israel. Most of the Bordeaux and Mediterranean varieties were here at the end of the 19th century. Syrah, which came here in the 1990s, but it settled in fast and became a natural for our region. I believe the Yarden Syrah 2000 produced by the Golan Heights Winery, was the first to be launched as a varietal.

SYRAH STRADDLES the all-conquering qualities of Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir. It can have something of the presence and structure of a Cabernet and the wild fruit aroma of a Pinot. It was the Australians that really introduced the variety to the world, under the name Shiraz. This was initially as varietal (a wine basically of one grape variety), then as the popular blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz and finally with the so-called Mediterranean style blend, GSM (Grenache Syrah Mourvedre.) They all came to our attention with the Australian success in conquering the world from the 1990s onward.

The great Syrah wines are deep-colored, with black fruit, blackberry and blueberry aromas, a spicy character and a hint of freshly ground black pepper. They will be more austere, lean and elegant from the Northern Rhone. The Aussie version will be bolder, more fully flavored with sweeter, riper fruit and the influence of the oak aging will be more apparent. To an extent, they also have textural quality that is unique in this variety. Some detect tar, a leathery flavor, or even a smoked meat character.

However, it is a very versatile grape variety. As much as the Rhone and Barossa Valley expressions differ, it may also be made into an easy-drinking, lighter wine altogether. These will be purple in color and have juicy red fruit, raspberry, plum aromas, with mouth filling fruit-led flavor. This style of Syrah can be refreshing and gluggable.

I have my own Shiraz story, from when I worked for Carmel Winery. The 2006 vintage was not a great year and it was tinged by war. In the crucial pre-harvest period, the growers were unable to enter vineyards

because of rockets fired from Hezbollah in the Second Lebanon War. Fast forward to 2010, the Carmel Kayoumi Vineyard Shiraz 2006 was sent to the Decanter World Wine Awards in London. We were surprised and delighted when it won the Regional Trophy! The winemaker and I flew to the Gala Dinner, held with the pomp, ceremony and splendor that only the British know how to do really well. We collected the Regional Trophy, presented by wine icon Steven Spurrier, which was photographed for posterity and then sat down to enjoy our meal, taste wine and schmooze with others from all over the wine world. It was like the Oscars. The ultimate winners were called up without prior knowledge. We had no expectation at all. Suddenly we heard our name being called. The Kayoumi Shiraz had won the International Trophy! *Decanter Magazine* called it the sensation of the competition. The winemaker Lior Lacser and I went up again, this time in front of the audience, to receive the Trophy, again from Spurrier. It was exciting, exhilarating and memorable. Israel has won many medals and trophies, but I believe this still remains the most prestigious award ever for an Israeli wine. The point of indulging myself with this story is that the star of the show was an Israeli Shiraz. It is a wine Israel makes really well.

OTHER GOOD Syrahs (or Shiraz) are made by Yarden and Chateau Golan from the Golan Heights; Tulip and Covenant Israel from the Galilee; Clos de Gat, Flam and Segal Whole Cluster from the Judean Hills and Nana from the Negev Desert. Garagistes providing top-notch Syrah are Mia Luce and Lewinsohn's Garage de Papa. For mid-priced, more fruit forward expressions, try Gamla or Tabor Adama. Then, there is the less expensive Barkan Classic and Carmel Private Collection. There are many more. Just look around.

My idea for this Hanukkah is to explore different expressions of Syrah or Shiraz. There is a known wine festival called "Winter of Syrah." A "Hanukkah of Syrah" sounds just as good! One approach could be to taste through the regions, at different price points or wine styles. A wine could be started on one day and then tasted alongside another one on the next. You could have a different wine each day, or every other day, according to your capacity, budget or the number of guests you have! Learn from the experience, but most of all, enjoy it. Que Syrah Syrah, whatever will be, will be. ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran, who has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com



EXTRA-VIRGIN olive oils from the award-winning Sindyanna of Galilee, a joint venture between Jewish and Arab women. (Sindyanna)