

Fifty years and counting

The Golan Heights Winery brought Israeli wine to the world's attention, and is keeping it there



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

All the talk of recent weeks was of the 50-year anniversary since the Six Day War and the unification of Jerusalem. This was also the 50th anniversary of the Golan Heights coming into our hands, and from a wine point of view, this was by far a most seminal event.

The Golan Heights proved to be the theater that fermented the quality revolution of Israeli wine, changing the fortunes of our wine industry forever and bringing back a golden age of Israeli wine for the first time in 2,000 years.

What is special about the Golan Heights is its altitude and terroir. It is a volcanic plateau that is overlooked by the snow-covered Mount Hermon and itself overlooks the beautiful Sea of Galilee. Its elevation rises to 1,200 meters above sea level. As most of Israel is on a latitude with North Africa, it can be hot and humid. Climb and you mitigate the problem of latitude, enjoy a cooler climate and a longer growing season, and gain the potential for greater freshness and complexity in the wines. As for the soil, it is volcanic tuff with a great deal of that black basalt stone you see everywhere on the Golan. It provides excellent drainage and good minerality.

Israel's wine history BG ("Before Golan") was far from distinguished. I remember baked wines lacking

fruit. I used to wonder if they were even made from grapes. White wines were more often than not yellowing and oxidized. At the time, a famous wine writer wrote about an Israeli Sauvignon Blanc, describing it as probably the nastiest wine he had ever tasted. Israel's most famous wine export was Adom Atik.

When the Golan Heights came into Israel's hands, the potential for a wine revolution was at hand, but we did not know it. However, Prof. Cornelius Ough of the University of California at Davis did. He saw the sprouting apple industry and thought wine grapes would also thrive. The pioneers who planted those first vineyards in 1976 laid the roots of the wine revolution that was to follow.

In 1983, the Golan Heights Winery was formed as a partnership of four kibbutzim and four moshavim. They sought expertise from California in the form of wine-making consultant Peter Stern and a series of young wine makers. Thus, the "New World" wine revolution, which basically taught how to make wine in hot countries, was imported to Israel.

The Golan Heights Winery elevated the importance of the vineyard and of vineyard management. The decision-making process in the vineyard of how to prune and when to harvest passed for the first time from the grower to the winery. Previously, vineyards were not considered that important. The grower and wine maker both had jobs to do, but they would never meet. A wine maker would never be seen in a vineyard. Today

it is understood one makes the wine in the vineyard.

At the winery, the investment was in technology. Everything was geared to quality: must chillers to reduce temperatures; gentle bladder presses' computer-controlled stainless-steel tanks allowing absolute temperature control; and expensive small oak barrels. A fanatical cleaning regime signposted the way to others.

The way they marketed the new wines could also be taught in schools. Quality labeling, pricing up, focusing on export and making the product rare in Israel was innovative and effective.

There are four wines that, for me, represent the life of this pioneering winery. The first is the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon, the finest ambassador of Israeli wine. This, for me, represents the 1980s.

At the time, it was the finest wine in Israel. Today it remains the best value varietal cabernet in Israel. This was the wine that set standards for the country. It has been Israel's most consistent award winner in international competitions. It ruled the roost as Israel changed from a white-wine-drinking country to a red one, and spread the word about the new quality of Israeli wine abroad.

I was in the wine trade in England when I heard with amazement that the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1984 had won a gold medal and the Winiarski Trophy at the International Wines and Spirit Competition in London in 1987. I remember the shock and pride in equal measure.

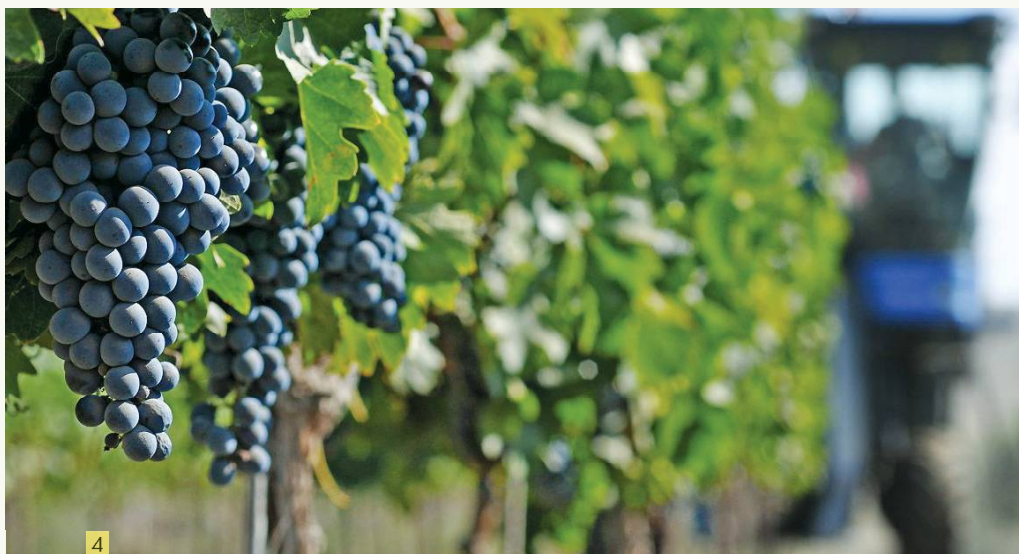


1 THE GOLAN, with Mt. Hermon in the background. (Golan Heights Winery)

2 VICTOR SCHOENFELD, legendary winemaker of the winery. (Golan Heights Winery)

3 THE GOLAN Heights Winery. (Courtesy)

4 HARVESTING CABERNET Sauvignon in the Tel Phares vineyard. (Yehuda Weinberg)



The 1990s is, for me, the era of Yarden Katzrin, the first “super” Israeli prestige wine. It became a cult wine because of its quality and rarity, being strictly allocated. It was only produced in especially good vintages.

Recently, I tasted a wine presented by its chief wine maker, Victor Schoenfeld, at the launch of the Katzrin 2013. He asked me how old it seemed. With a light browning at the edge of the rim, I assumed it had some age, but it tasted quite young. I thought it might be 10 to 12 years old but was so wrong. It was the Yarden Katzrin 1993, no less than 24 years old and showing astonishing youth.

It is relatively rare for an Israeli wine to last more than 12 to 15 years, but Golan wines are built to last, and this was the ultimate, vivid example. It remains the most expensive prestige blend in the country, costing NIS 450 a bottle.

The 2000s for me were symbolized by Mount Hermon Red. This was the time when the winery became a six-million-bottle operation, which is big by any stan-

dards. Suddenly, volume and sales became important to the winery, which had previously been preoccupied solely with quality and excellence.

Of course, it rose to the occasion magnificently. Mount Hermon Red became the largest selling wine in the country by far, way ahead of anything the larger wineries (Barkan and Carmel) could muster. Fruit forward, full of flavor, easy drinking and great value, the wine went from strength to strength. The labeling, which led customers to understand that they were drinking the aspirational Yarden, also helped the ascending popularity.

The 2010s for me is the era of Yarden Blanc de Blancs. This is Israel’s finest sparkling wine.

The quality gap that the Golan enjoyed in the 1980s and ’90s no longer exists to the same extent. There are a handful of small boutique wineries today making very fine wines indeed. Furthermore, the larger wineries have also responded to the gauntlet thrown down by the Golan Heights Winery so long ago.

The wine market worships all that is new or small, and is in love with gimmicks. So the older kid on the block could be regarded as the establishment by the self-regarded wine intelligentsia. There are those among the chattering classes who feel the winery has slipped a few notches in recent years. However, even those doubting Thomases agree that the Yarden Blanc de Blancs is one of the outstanding Israeli wines – so this wine in particular continues to fly the flag.

Much of the ongoing success is due to Schoenfeld. He was appointed chief wine maker in 1992. With his understanding of technology, passion for wine and rigorous standards, he has maintained the winery’s quality. He has also managed to steer it to be the most technologically advanced in Israel, maintaining standards despite increasing production.

Schoenfeld’s wines have won awards at the very highest level, whether white, red, sparkling or desert wines. I once remember hosting the famous Japanese sommelier Shinya Tasaki at the winery when I worked there. He asked Schoenfeld which of the wines he made was his favorite. I understood the question – most wine makers have a blend or variety that is a bit more of their baby than others. It is always instructive to know.

Schoenfeld blinked and thought, and seemed to be having difficulty in giving an answer. Then he said hesitantly: “I am never happy with any wine I make.” What he meant was that he was seeking perfection and always saw the faults. It was a totally unscripted and honest moment that said everything about him. The pursuit of excellence, striving for perfection and never being satisfied are his hallmarks and have kept the winery on top.

The elephant in the room is, of course, politics. How the Golan Heights is still regarded by much of the world as “occupied territory” beats me and defies common sense. The only thing in common with the West Bank is that it came into Israel’s hands in 1967.

There is no moral problem on the Golan Heights. It is bereft of Palestinians. In the past, Syrian President Bashar Assad was not Jordan’s King Hussein, and so to whom did the world think the Golan should be given back? Now, with the breakup of Syria, the idea is absurd, but the political labeling lives on.

To its credit, the winery continues its work unhindered. However, the situation remains a pathetic failure of Israeli political diplomacy.

Straight after the Six Day War, who would have thought the Golan would become most famous for its wine? The Golan Heights Winery was the catalyst that took Israel into a new promised land of wine quality, and Yarden remains to this day the visual ambassador of “Brand Israel” around the wine world. ■

The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is known as the “English voice of Israeli wine.”
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