

ISRAEL'S FIRST CULT WINE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Yarden Katzrin 2016 has just been launched, 30 years after the first Katzrin was made in 1990. To put this in perspective, 30 years ago Israeli wine was in a different place entirely. Then the leading Israeli red wines were Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1985, Ha'yayin Shel Segal 1988 (Segal's Wine), and Carmel Rothschild Cabernet Sauvignon 1985. The largest wineries were Carmel Mizrahi, Eliaz and Efrat. WEST-Stock (Monfort, etc.) had just gone bankrupt. Including the monasteries and the "Jerusalem wineries," there were just 12 wineries in total. The harvest was half as much as today, and in those days, Carmel Mizrahi had 75% of the market. Selected Emerald Riesling was the largest-selling wine and whites outsold reds.

Golan Heights Winery came onto the Israeli wine scene like a comet, and through example changed the Israeli wine forever. The idea of making wine in the vineyards, planting at high elevations, introducing advanced technology in the winery, using prestige wine marketing and organizing innovative winery events for PR were all done for the first time under their watch.

In 1990, the winery decided to make Israel's first super-deluxe wine. The grapes were harvested and the wine was made by Jim Klein, and Victor Schoenfeld, who replaced him, made the blend of mainly Cabernet Sauvignon balanced by Merlot. As a result of two winemakers being involved, Peter Stern, the Californian wine consultant who was an important figure to the winery in those days, had the honor of signing the back label.

Segev Yerovam was CEO of the winery at that time. Today he is scarcely known by the younger generation, but those who knew him remember him as a legendary CEO and the visionary brain behind many of the winery's ground-breaking initiatives. He decided to call the wine "Katzrin," after the small town in the central Golan where the winery is situated.

Yarden Katzrin 1990 was launched in 1994. The wine was immediately priced up, and for the first time a wine was made to target the aspirational private collector, rather than the more regular channels of restaurants and wine shops. Buyers were rationed, and the next wine was not made for another three years, so the hype and scarcity made for excellent marketing.

Yarden Katzrin was Israel's first cult wine and also became the first Israeli \$100 wine. It used to be the height of showing off for a private collector to throw open his cellar and show how many Katzrin bottles he had. This was done by buying his allowance under his own name and then sending in his "sisters, cousins and aunts" (with apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan),



YARDEN KATZRIN, Israel's first cult wine, produced by the Golan Heights Winery. (Hagit Goren)

or anyone else who could help him increase his stash.

I have a few Katzrin memories of my own. When I was export manager of the Golan Heights Winery, I was rationed to 10 cases of Yarden Katzrin for the whole of the world. I visited Charlie Trotter's Restaurant in Chicago, one of the most famous names in gastronomy and wine service, with a 26,000 bottle investment cellar. The second-to-none image for wine there was created by the great Larry Stone MS, one of the world's most famous sommeliers and a wine hero of mine.

I went to the restaurant nervously carrying a bottle of the Katzrin and was graciously received by the sommelier, Belinda Chang, who is also very well-known. There was no invitation to sit or time for small talk. So we stayed standing for the few minutes she had to spare. I was in the middle of my spiel, when Charlie Trotter himself put his head round the door and said, "We will take it all!" The story illustrates this wine's part in creating a prestige category for Israel.

I was invited to lunch at Mondavi Winery in Napa Valley with Peter Stern. We sat with Michael Mondavi, the elder son, and the wine we drank was Yarden Katzrin 1990! For me to drink an Israeli wine with Mondavi at their winery, was a kind of coming of age. Then, I remember a charity auction, one of the first in Israel at the Tel Aviv Hilton. A double magnum, three-liter bottle of Yarden Katzrin 1993 was auctioned and became the most expensive Israeli wine ever sold at the time.

Another memory of Katzrin in the late 1990s was

the Golan Vintage Culinary & Wine Festival. At the Gala Dinner, Yarden Katzrin was served. I was with the famous French sommelier Philippe Bourguignon as he chipped away the wax from the top of the bottles so he could open them. We opened and tasted 16 large-format bottles. It certainly was extremely rare, even unique, for so many large bottles of Katzrin to be opened at one time.

I tasted the Yarden Katzrin 1990 at a recent Passover Seder. It represents the year I came into the Israeli wine trade, so it had some emotional value for me. Unfortunately, the wine was past its best. However, I was privileged to taste the Yarden Katzrin 1993 in 2018. It was a revelation, still youthful and everything in place – after 25 years! This reminded me again that Israeli wine lasts longer than we have been led to believe, and that Yarden wines are the best bet for long-term cellaring (along with Margalit in my opinion.)

OVER THE YEARS, Yarden Katzrin has become less scarce and is produced more often. Most times, the wine has tended to be basically a Cabernet Sauvignon, balanced with a little Merlot. The Golan Heights Winery is the king of Cabernet. The Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon, Gamla Cabernet Sauvignon and Mount Hermon Red (a blend including Cabernet) are each market leaders at different price points. In some years (1996, 2000, 2003) a smidgen of Cabernet Franc was added. More recently (in 2012 and 2014), a tiny amount of Petit Verdot and Malbec was



THE SPECIAL fruit for Yarden Katzrin grows in the Golan Heights vineyards. (Yehuda Weinberg)



THE HIGH-ELEVATION Golan Heights Winery vineyards, against the backdrop of Mount Hermon. (Golan Heights Winery)

added for the first time.

Now the 2016 has been released, virtually, because of COVID-19. It is only the thirteenth Yarden Katzrin to be produced, 30 years after the first Katzrin was made.

It is the first Katzrin made from all five Bordeaux varieties. It is a blend of 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Malbec, 9% Merlot, 5% Petit Verdot and 2% Cabernet Franc. This is the lowest percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon ever in a Katzrin wine. Fortunately, it adds up to 100%. There was a time when the grape variety percentages on the back label added up to more than 100%. The marketing people were prepared to die a death, but no one noticed and the wine was lauded nonetheless! In theory, the five traditional varieties of Bordeaux make a perfect blend. The Cabernet Sauvignon provides structure, the Malbec fruit, the Merlot a soft texture, the Cabernet Franc aroma, and the Petit Verdot color and tannin.

The winemaker makes a blend by isolating the finest plots for each variety. The Golan Heights Winery makes more than 400 boutique single-vineyard, or rather single-plot wines. These are aged and then tasted again, so the winemaker and his team are able to isolate the best of the best for what is the ultimate expression from the winery. In this case, the different varieties are aged separately in small French oak barrels for 18 months. After final selection, the blend is returned to oak barrels for a further six months. The vintage of 2016 was also a good year and relatively stable, especially after the calamitous 2015. In fact, it was the shortest harvest by the winery in 22 years.

Today, the Yarden Katzrin 2016 costs NIS 490. The other famous Israeli prestige wines – such as Castel Grand Vin, Margalit Enigma and Tzora Misty Hills – all cost under NIS 300. Does the wine justify the price? The answer is never, but I suppose if you have to ask

the price, then it is not the wine for you. The 1848 Winery Grand Reserve, Alexander The Great Grand Reserve, Dalton Matatia, Flam Noble, Margalit Special Reserve and Clos de Gat Sycra Cabernet Sauvignon are examples of wines that break the NIS 300 barrier, and they all get snapped up. So, prestige, rarity and exclusivity are traits of a wine that need to be taken into account, not just quality.

When the Bordeaux classification was created in 1855, a ranking was made listing the best wineries on the Left Bank of Bordeaux. (To avoid confusion, it is called the Left Bank, rather than West Bank!) Chateau Lafite was selected as the first of the firsts. Astonishingly, this same ranking still carries weight today, yet surprisingly, the ranking was primarily made on price. By this criteria, Yarden Katzrin is also a statement, with added value and status. It is a target for collectors and it has maintained its mythical image that it had back in 1994.

Over all this time, the label has barely changed. It is still in a tall, handsome bottle, with a stylish narrow, black label. Look at the best wines over the years and the labels barely change. Castel, Flam, Margalit, Clos de Gat and Yarden have the same look they always did. Compare this, for instance, to Carmel over the same period, where each new manager feels compelled to make their own label changes, as if to signify they have been there!

Let me give last word to winemaker Victor Schoenfeld: "The 2016 Yarden Katzrin hints at its richness with the first whiff of its aroma. This special wine expresses attractive characters of ripe cherries, blackberries and plums, intermingling with pleasing notes of orange peel and chocolate, earth and herb, flowers and spice. Full bodied, this complex wine displays concentrated flavors and a very long finish."

The production of Yarden Katzrin 1990 remains a milestone in the evolution of Israeli wine and the Yarden Katzrin 2016 reminds us that the quality, consistency and professionalism is ongoing. ■

The writer, a wine trade veteran, has contributed to the advance of Israeli wines for nearly 35 years. He is referred to as 'the English voice of Israeli wine.' www.adammontefiore.com



THE GOLAN Heights Winery whooshed onto the Israeli wine scene like a comet. (Kfir Haravi)