

# KOSHER COSMOPOLITAN

Kosher wine becomes a participation sport on social media

• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**T**he number of kosher wineries, kosher restaurants and kosher products has simply exploded in the last few decades. In the wider wine world, kosher wine is a niche and scarcely important. However, the kosher world is exactly that – a world in itself. The major kosher brands are global brands – but in the kosher context.

There are three main centers of kosher wine in the world: the cities of New York, Paris and Tel Aviv. Visit kosher liquor stores in New York, kosher hypermarkets in Paris and supermarkets in Tel Aviv and there is a bewildering wall of wines. It must be quite daunting to the regular consumer.

Despite the fact that kosher wine is indeed international, the shelves in these places look nothing alike. The French shelves will be mainly French wines, with a high proportion of red wines and rosés, many of them sold only in France. The Israeli shelves will be mainly Israeli wines. The American shelves will also differ, though their selection is more international.

When I first came to Israel, there were fewer than 10 wineries here. Today, there more than 300 – and countless additional domestic wineries and garagistes. I remember when there were only two Israeli wineries exporting to America; today there are 70. Once only three countries made kosher wine and today almost every wine-producing country produces kosher wine.

Some of the wines, particularly from Israel and California, are made by wineries specializing in kosher wines. Others are produced by famous names that decide to make a kosher cuvée. However, the source of many other wines will be unknown, as they are private-label wines made by an importer or distributor. Once, the kosher customer could be familiar with the main wines, because they were so few of them. Today they don't stand a chance. How do you keep up? The answer is with enormous difficulty.

It was not so long ago that the kosher wine industry had a media figurehead – the legendary wine critic Daniel Rogov. He published his annual *Rogov's Guide to Israeli Wines* and also *Rogov's Guide to Kosher Wines*. He also moderated his own forum (Wine Lovers discussion group) and became the ultimate guru-like fig-

GABRIEL GELLER founded two Facebook pages in both English and French dedicated to advancing the kosher conversation in the wine world. (Tsvi Cohen)



DAVID RACCAH blogs about kosher wine and food in 'Kosher Wine Musings.' (Courtesy)



YOSSIE HORWITZ is a blogger on kosher wines and author of 'Yossie's Corkboard.' (Courtesy)



LEGENDARY WINE critic Daniel Rogov. (Courtesy)

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ure, answering questions and prompting discussions. However, the influence of the major guru-critic has since waned with the onset of bloggers and social media. Now everyone has an opinion that can be heard. There will probably never be another individual with the power to influence like Robert Parker had in the wider wine world or Daniel Rogov in Israel and the kosher world. Those days have passed.

"Wine Musings" and "Yossie's Corkboard" are two blogs that try to keep consumers up to date, and they do a great job. David Raccah writes the Wine Musings blog, which covers kosher wine and food. Raccah is a wine and food lover, overflowing with enthusiasm. Not for him the dry analytical approach; his passion oozes through in his writing. He writes the most detailed and adjectival tasting notes of almost anyone I know, with baskets of fruit and liberal handfuls of herbs and spices squeezed into each and every tasting note. He certainly gets more out of a wine than most, but what the reader gets is a pretty clear inkling of what this particular blogger thinks of a wine. He is a gourmet overflowing in personal, subjective expression of what a wine means to him, but he is consistent and informative and does not stand on the fence. As such, he does great service to those who read him.

Yossie's Corkboard and the well-known newsletter are written and distributed by Yossie Horwitz. The Horwitz style is different. He is a lawyer and writes like a lawyer. His pieces are long, wordy and careful. His reviews are less critical and more politically correct. But he is great at detail and covering the ground. If you want information as opposed to opinionated text, his articles are full of information, and you know the information given is likely to be correct. This is not to be sneezed at. I am constantly shocked by how many journalists can write incorrect information seemingly without caring. Both Raccah and Horwitz are up to date, regularly visiting Israel to touch base and feel the pulse of what is happening.

However, the world of Facebook has spawned a new medium. This is a place where everyone can be a critic. Wine is a broad subject; people don't just like to drink wine, they like to read about it and talk about it, too. This presented an opportunity to Gabriel Geller that he took with both hands.

Geller is someone who uniquely has experience of

the three very different worlds of kosher wine. Since 2008, he has been around the wine trade, absorbing information like a sponge. He is a European, born in Switzerland, who has worked in Israel and now settled in the US. He speaks the three main languages of the kosher wine world, English, French and Hebrew, and now is even adding New York slang to his repertoire! He has experience in each world. In Europe, particularly in the French-speaking part of Belgium, Switzerland and of course in France, he was a consultant and critic, dipping his toes in the wine world and allowing the passion to pull him in, and he also did his fair share of writing. For a short time he had a wine shop in Jerusalem, specializing in wines from small wineries. Now in America, he works for Royal Wine, the largest importer and distributor of kosher wine in the world. As director of public relations and advertising, his responsibilities include wine education within the company. I refer to him as the "kosher cosmopolitan" and his breadth of experience is a key advantage.

He was a participant on the Daniel Rogov forum. This was the forum from which Rogov signed off in flamboyant fashion by writing his own obituary and having it posted to announce his death! Geller saw the void filled by Rogov's passing and felt the need for the kosher conversation to continue. So in 2014 he founded two Facebook pages in both English and French. One is called "Kosher Wine: Sharing & Experiences" and the other, "Vins casher: partage, bons plans et conseils." These groups together include no fewer than 6,000 members. Everyone is equal and can post which wines they like or dislike. Anyone can have an opinion, but the guru above all is Geller, who seems to have the definitive final say. He has the luxury of providing opinions without delving into tasting notes or giving information. It is most impressive that he has experience and an opinion on almost any kosher wine brought up in discussion. He was once quoted in an interview as saying, "I have an unusual sensory memory, almost a photographic memory, when it comes to wine. I can remember nearly all the wines I have tasted... without any written notes." Wow. I don't think I have ever come across that before from the major experts I have met around the world. However, despite this knowledge and self-con-

fidence, he does not over-dominate the forum. I like the way he holds back, sometimes prompting to encourage discussion or cajoling with humor. However, if someone wants a view, he provides his unreservedly.

As a result, the following of the forum has increased and his status as the guru of this group has solidified. You would think his Royal connection would confuse the credibility issue, but Geller seems to have earned the respect of his followers and colleagues by being credible and honest.

His wife Yael is also a partner here, a very active contributor. Whereas Gabriel is generally diplomatic, his wife is unfettered. She is up front, entertainingly frank, blunt and takes no prisoners. There is no gray area as far as she is concerned. Everything is either very good or very bad. Part of the benefit of a Facebook page is that it is not the United Nations. Together they make a great team and they certainly know their stuff.

The kosher wine Facebook page is the most current and immediate place to get information on kosher wines. It is also a great place to show off. It is amusing to me to see how many people post a list of wines they are having for Shabbat or the next festival. Woe betide the so-called wine expert whose list is not long enough with enough quality wines! This brings out the peacock syndrome in people, which is less impressive, and I think they are missing the point of what wine is for, but it is a free world. It seems people just love to post look-at-me photos with lots of wines standing in a row.

The three musketeers together provide a sterling service to the kosher consumer. Actually, they do not overlap that much, and one complements the other. "Kosher Wine: Sharing & Experiences," "Kosher Wine Musings" and "Yossie's Corkboard" are thoroughly recommended. However, the "Sharing & Experiences" forum allows you to become personally involved, sharing, talking and learning from others. Chapeau to Gabriel Geller! I like the idea of making wine a participation sport and encourage kosher wine mavens to join it. ■

*The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for more than 30 years. He is known as the "English voice of Israeli wine."*

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