

ONCE UPON A TIME

The deep-rooted story of wine in this region spans thousands of years



• ADAM MONTEFIORE



WINE USED to be stored in amphorae in cool caves, as at Avdat in the Negev. (Dani Kronenberg/Israel Nature and Parks Authority)

ABOVE: MOSAICS, like this one from Beit She'an, can provide insight into winemaking in ancient times. (Dani Kronenberg/Israel Antiquities Authority)

There are thousands of wine presses in Israel, you can't help but stumble over them wherever you go. It always gives me the chills when I see one of these, because it connects winemaking today with winemaking in ancient times. It reminds me that wine is a great ambassador of modern Israel, but it was also extremely important at the dawn of the Jewish people in biblical times.

The first vineyard grower, according to the Bible, was Noah. He "planted a vineyard and drank the wine" (Genesis 9:20). I like this story for a few reasons. Firstly, Noah's Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey. This is a case where archaeology supports the Bible's narrative. Eastern Turkey was one of the earliest places where evidence of ancient winemaking has been found. In fact, winemaking arguably began between the Caspian Sea and Black Sea, which is not far away.

Secondly, I imagine Noah took a cutting of a wild vine into the Ark with him, so he could plant it when the flood subsided. The idea of planting a vineyard is a statement of settling in one place, of becoming farmers instead of wandering nomads. Thucydides said man became civilized when he planted the vine and olive tree.

Finally, the text is very succinct. It talks about planting a vineyard and drinking the wine. It does not mention he made the wine. That is understood. We sometimes talk about "wine" growers, not grape growers. The French have a wonderful word, "vigneron." This is someone who looks after a vineyard to make wine. The winemaking is understood. Noah was a vigneron.

The hunter and forager sought sweet fruits because they were tasty, had calories and good nutritional value. The sweetness of ripe grapes was prized. The journey from wild grapes to cultivated grapes took hundreds of years of natural selection.

The discovery of wine occurred by chance along the way. Each individual grape is a self-contained mini-winery. If a grape skin split, the white yeast bloom on the skin would naturally attack the sugars in the juice. Wine would result. As they did

not understand the process, wine swiftly became elevated to the status of a nectar of the gods, and all kinds folklore grew up to replace the lack of knowledge. They did understand that wine was potent and had properties to improve the mood, therefore it was prized all the more.

Isaiah's "Song of a Vineyard" (Isaiah 5) is a wonderful source of information about vineyards and viticulture. From this, we learn that the vineyard was on a "fertile hill." Vineyards like slopes. There is more sunlight if facing the right way, drainage is better and the vine will grow on slopes where other crops will not grow. We are told a new vineyard has to be "dug up and cleared of stones." That has not changed. If you visit an Israeli vineyard today, you will often find a pile of stones in a corner of a vineyard as evidence of the difficulties in clearing it. They planted the "choicest" vines. That has not changed either. Then, certain vines gave better results just like today. "He built a watchtower." Many vineyards in ancient times had a watchtower to guard the precious fruit. Not much new there. The vine would naturally sprawl along the ground or grow up trees. If cultivated, it had to be trained or grown on a pergola.

For harvesting, a pruning hook was used. In that famous phrase: "Beat swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks," they used imagery that was familiar to the people. It shows how important wine was to the economy. The simple person would understand messages wrapped in wine, because it was so much part of their daily life.

The grapes would be picked and quickly brought to the wine press, which was usually situated next door to the vineyard. The Israelites knew that if the grapes did not arrive quickly, the wine would be spoiled. Even today, many wineries are situated close to vineyards.

THE GRAPES would be picked by all the family, filling up straw baskets, which would then be covered by vine leaves to protect them from the sun. Donkeys, wine's oldest and most loyal harvest helpers, would take the grapes to the nearby wine press.

Farmers already knew that drying the grapes was good for preserving them as raisins to be used

for food. They swiftly learned also that making wine from sun-dried grapes would make a sweeter wine. Grapes were sometimes laid out on mats next to the vineyard. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose – the more things change, the more they stay the same. This method is one of the oldest winemaking techniques, still used today in Italy, Greece and Cyprus.

The wine press (or “gat” in Hebrew) would be a flat limestone basin dug out of the bedrock. Maybe a wooden structure would be built overhead to protect the workers and wine from the Sun. The grapes would be trodden by foot – an ideal solution, because the foot was heavy enough to break the skins, but not hard enough to crush the pips, which would have made the wine harsh and tannic. Today, there are places in the world where this is still done – in port country, for example.

The grape treaders would hold on to a rope or twine hanging from the wooden surround. It can be slippery work without anything to steady you. In Portugal, the “grape stompers” lock shoulders, move backward and forward in a manic marching rhythm – usually singing to help keep up the momentum.

The must, or juice, would flow through a channel chiseled in stone, into a lower collection area, which would be deep and narrower. This “well” was called the “yekev” in Hebrew, which translates to winery.

In the yekev, fermentation would begin naturally. The wild yeasts from the skin of the grapes would gorge on the sugar inside. The result would be heat, carbon dioxide and that magic elixir called wine. Fermentation would take three days to a week. The wine would then be siphoned into a lower area, using twigs and thorns as a rustic filtration method, into large clay jars.

These would be amphora, with a pointed base and large oversized handles, like a pair of big ears. They would be put in cool, underground caves for storage and maturation. Sometimes, olive oil would be gently poured on top of the wine or pine resin was added so the wine would not oxidize and turn to vinegar. The Greek Retsina is still flavored with pine resin.

Wine was usually flavored to improve taste, cover impurities and act as a preservative. The additions could be sweet, like date honey, or savory, like sea water. Flowers, herbs and spices were added – as is the case in a vermouth.

WE DO KNOW the wine was usually red. There are numerous mentions of blood-red wine throughout the scriptures. The blessing Judah receives from Jacob (Genesis 49:11-12) is the clearest: “He will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.” Many don’t understand the text, but it does not take much imagination to interpret it as referring to three separate stages: the harvest, the winemaking and drinking the wine. I like the idea that Judea was then a wine-growing region of note. The Judean Hills today is one of our finest wine-growing region appellations.

When the two spies return from Canaan to Moses, saying “It is a land of milk and honey and this is the fruit” (Numbers 13:1-33), showing a large, outside bunch of grapes carried on a pole between two men, it was a statement not just about the productivity of the land, but about the importance of wine. The grapes came from the Hebron area.

The Talmud mentions 60 types of wine. They are discussed in terms of quality and use, but not

grape variety. There is not a Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay among them. However, a great deal of information was given on inscriptions on the jars themselves. These were the forerunners of today’s labels.

White wine was introduced only later. In the Christian legend of turning water to wine at the wedding feast at Cana, the wine must have been white, because they could not tell the difference from the water. This story occurred in the Galilee, where many of our best vineyards are today.

Ancient Israel was a farming community, and a vineyard had a special status. If someone had planted a new vineyard, he was even excused from being called up to fight in the event of war. The making of wine was considered of prime importance. If a wine was made sour and undrinkable, the phrase “Baruch Dayan Emet” was used, as though someone had passed away.

Sukkot was the wine grape harvest festival. After the harvest, there was a celebration. The young, single girls, all dressed in white, would go and dance in the vineyard, hoping to attract the attention of the eligible young men.

In ancient times, grapes were one of the blessed species. Wine was a mainstay of the economy and part of the religious ritual. The Eastern Mediterranean was the cradle of wine culture, long before the vine reached France and Italy. Wine was a symbol of ancient Israel and the Jewish people. Today, it is a symbol of modern Israel and is our finest ambassador.

The ultimate prophecy regarding wine is by the prophet Amos: “My people Israel... they shall plant vineyards and drink the wine thereof” (Amos 9:14). He said: “The mountains shall drip

(Amos 9:13). Look at today’s Israel with 5,500 hectares of vineyards and over 300 wineries – proof that some prophecies come true. ■

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A RECONSTRUCTED wine press in the Ancient Katzrin Park. (Dani Kronenberg)



AGE-OLD TERRACED vineyards in the Jerusalem Hills. (Dani Kronenberg)