



ASSAF WINERY is situated near Kidmat Zvi on the central Golan Heights.

GUESTS AND visitors enjoy homemade delights from the AdiKa Café.
(Photos: Courtesy)

PARADISE ON THE GOLAN



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

It was Shabbat morning. I saw Assaf Kedem, wine grower and tourism pioneer, sitting quietly, with a cherished, well-earned cigarette held between thumb and forefinger, like an inscrutable, zen figure, contemplating the future. He is never one to sit on his laurels. Kedem is a worker, not a man of words. He does not have dreams, but a vision. He does not reach outside of the family circle for help; he has achieved everything with his own hands.

He became a grape grower in 1995, caring for vineyards at Kidmat Zvi on the central Golan. He then traveled to South Africa in search of winemaking knowledge and received ongoing advice from Peter Silverberg, an internationally trained winemaker who worked at the Golan Heights Winery. In 1997, he experimented making his own wine and in 1998 formed Bazelet Hagolan with Yoav Levy. Later, he decided to go it alone and left to form Assaf Winery.

In the early 2000s, he gathered his family around him and said: "Look, guys, I have this vision. If you support me, we will do it together. If not, don't worry about me, I will go back to my vines and wines, and be content."

Kedem's dream was to build a wine village with winery, vineyard, a restaurant, accommodation and a visitors' center. He mentioned it to me once, when I visited the original primitive winery, and I nodded, smiled and said something like, "That would be nice." I assumed that would be the last I would hear of it.

It seems as though I did not know this person as well as I thought, or his family. Fast forward a decade and welcome to the Kedem Family Wine Village, the first of its type in Israel, with all the facilities he planned.



ASSAF KEDEM, father, grower, winemaker, and founder of Assaf Winery and the Kedem Wine Village.

Every member of the family pitched in to help offering their own skills. Oren Kedem, Assaf's son, is now CEO of the complex. He is smart, innovative and a fervent ambassador for the Golan. He went on study visits to California and South Africa and he shares the wine-making with his father. Karen, Oren Kedem's wife, is the person who runs the "zimmer" accommodation. You could not find a warmer or more professional hostess. Adi, Assaf's daughter, who studied at the French Culinary Institute in New York, is the force behind the AdiKa Cafe, where everything is homemade. Shahar, another son, is the artist in the family.

The shabby chic decor, which contains an eating area, tasting room and private room for groups up to 14 people, and the beautifully equipped cabins owe a great deal to his taste. Hadassah, Kedem's wife, deals with groups and events. She is never up front, but her attention to detail is present everywhere. They recently hosted a wedding, with all that implies, which was a great success for all concerned. The younger brother Tomer, just back from a visit to the Sinai when I visited, and is interested in economics... another piece of the puzzle complete. The strength of Assaf is he is prepared to delegate and everyone's skills, space and responsibilities are respected.

Recently, I paid a visit to the Kedem Wine Village, just off the Route 91, not so far from Katzrin. It is situated between Kidmat Zvi and the Gilbon Stream, on the site of an old Circassian village, surrounded by eucalyptus trees. These took me back to Assaf's early wines, where there was a distinct eucalyptus, minty character in the reds. There are three cabins which are spacious and beautifully decorated. Whoever designed it and chose the extras has good taste and style in abundance. These compare well with zimmers anywhere. The welcome was so warm, friendly and personal. I should not forget Fiona and Morris, the family dogs, who bounded up to give a lick and a wag when we sat on the deck outside.

THE FRIDGE was filled with what are deliciously called *nishnushim* in Hebrew. Cheeses beautifully wrapped, homemade bread, locally picked olives, homemade apple juice and water flavored with mint and herbs, and of course, plenty of wine and glasses.

Of course, when Kedem was caught having his private cigarette, he was not congratulating himself on the house that he built, but planning for the future. Two new cabins are nearly finished along with a new



VINTAGES ALA Assaf: (from left) Pinot Gris; Rujum 91 Cabernet Sauvignon; and Pink Zinfandel.

ONE OF the well-equipped cabins in the Kedem Wine Village.

spa. Then, he explained, he is planting olive trees because they need the fruit for the restaurant. The Kedem family is like a shark that perishes if it does not go forward.

I remember Segev Yerovam, CEO of the Golan Heights Winery, saying to me in the early 1990s, “One day there will be a wine route on the Golan.” Today, his dream has come to fruition. Wine lovers can visit the Golan Heights, stay at the Kedem Wine Village and visit wineries, taste wine and hike in vineyards. Pelter, Ortal, Assaf and Chateau Golan are wineries producing wines that are not kosher and they receive visitors on Shabbat, while Domaine Seror, Golan Heights Winery, Bazelet Hagolan and Odem Mountain Winery are kosher. (Of course, Pelter Winery also has its kosher winery called Matar.) For a weekend, I suggest you visit the kosher wineries on Friday and the non-kosher wineries on Saturday. To avoid disappointment, it is always worth booking in advance. A wonderful breakfast and a late lunch can be enjoyed at the AdiKa Restaurant. To complete the Golan experience, I suggest dining at the very good Moshbutz Restaurant at Ramot. The succulent meat dishes are locally sourced and the wines and beers are all from the Golan Heights.

Overlooking the Sea of Galilee, the Golan is a volcanic plateau that rises to the snow-covered Mount Hermon. It is the coolest vineyard region in Israel and the soil is a mixture of the volcanic tuff and black basalt stone. The Golan has a stark beauty interspersed by inactive volcanoes like Avital and Bental, bunkers, minefields, military bases and vineyards. Horses and cattle roam the fields and wolves howl at night. The area reeks of tranquility and calmness, and it is a welcome antidote to the super hyper life we live in the center of the country.

We have no real agritourism in Israel. The local definition of wineries as industry instead of agriculture means wineries are situated in industrial zones, sometimes miles from vineyards. This means we suffer a severe handicap when trying to build a serious wine tourism program in Israel. It is like competing with one hand behind your back, and absurdly, it is your own side that has handicapped you. However, the Kedem Wine Village is true agritourism in action. You have an opportunity to totally absorb yourself in a wine region and its food and wine.

Assaf Winery can be forgotten because the cabins and café are so impressive, but it shouldn't be. The winery produces 55,000 bottles a year. The wines are a father-and-son expression of the local terroir. Both Assaf and Oren sign the bottles. They have a young vineyard within the wine village; the others are in Kidmat Zvi and they have their best plot 890 meters above

sea level in the northern Golan.

Oren has introduced the idea of a community harvest encouraging *avodah ivrit* (Hebrew labor). They only harvest manually. Their happy harvesters are family, friends and wine lovers looking for a unique wine experience. Oren makes clear: “We don't pay you and you do not pay us,” but they sing and dance the night away around a campfire, with good food and wine. Then, they are woken up before the crack of dawn by Oren, who leads them to the vineyards for the hard work ahead.

There are four wines particularly dear to Kedem. He is a big fan of South Africa and he is particularly proud of his Chenin Blanc and 4 Seasons Pinotage. The full-flavored Caesarea Shiraz is in memory of his father and the “Mossad” unit where he served. Above all else, is the Assaf Moise Single Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, the winery's prestigious Grand Reserve. The white wine I liked most is the excellent Assaf Pinot Gris 2017. It has a stone fruit aroma, a mineral taste and a clean refreshing finish. It is the perfect wine with

the excellent and tasty tapas and local goat cheese platter served by the AdiKa Café. The Assaf Zinfandel 2017 is the perfect wine to sit with in the grounds of the wine village with a book and friendly company. It is delicate, fruity with aromas of fresh strawberries and very good acidity. For the dinner in the meat restaurant, I made sure to take the Rujum 91 2015. This a classic Cabernet Sauvignon, with deep color and fruit aromas of blackberry, blackcurrant and ripe plum. It has that hint of mint, reminiscent of the Assaf wines I remember from the past, a full flavor and a long lingering finish.

The Kedem Wine Village, beautifully positioned to allow access North or South, is a wine paradise. There, tourists and wine lovers may experience the Golan Heights to the full and enjoy the quality of the region's wines. ■

The writer has advanced Israeli wine for more than 30 years and is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com



THE KEDEM family: All are involved in managing the winery, wine village and café.