



A WINE heritage passed down over 170 years. Winemaking grandfather, the late Moshe Shor, showing his grandchildren a newly planted vineyard.

(Photos: Courtesy Zion Winery)

RETURN TO ZION



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Thirty years ago, when I landed in the bubble that is Israeli wines, there were just 12 wineries here. Four of them were known dismissively as “The Jerusalem wineries.” They were not mainstream and basically were buried deep into the liquid religion market they served. One of these was called Zion Winery, owned by the Shor family. This is a winery whose heritage goes back to 1848, long before Carmel, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, Rishon Le Zion or Zichron Ya’acov were even heard of.

Imagine a family journey lasting 170 years, which leads from the Muslim Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, travels via Beit Israel in western Jerusalem and arrives in Mishor Adumim, east of Jerusalem in the Judean Desert. This is the extraordinary story of the Shor family, which is still making wine today. They are Israel’s oldest existing wine-making family.

It began when Rabbi Mordechai Avraham Galin (aka Galina), arrived from Ukraine in 1835 and settled in Safed. The family moved to the Old City of Jerusalem when he became head of the Tiferet Yisrael Yeshiva. His son, Yitzhak Galina-Shor, understood the family could not live on charity alone, so he chose wine as a profession. His sister had married a Baruch Shor, who by chance happened to have a rare license given by the Ottoman Turks for trading in alcohol. So they changed their name to Shor, used Baruch Shor’s license and opened a winery in 1848 in the Old City of Jerusalem. The first evidence of the family’s involvement in the wine trade was the census commissioned by Moses Montefiore in 1849.

Then it was a very different world. It was a domestic

winery in the Muslim quarter, adjacent to the Kotel Hakatan (Little Western Wall). They put barrels as a barrier alongside the wall so no one would inadvertently touch the forbidden Temple Mount. In those days there was no bottled wine, no labels, no brands and no kashrut certificate. Wine was sold in small casks. Grapes came from Hebron vineyards owned by Arabs. Payment was made in advance to reserve the crop. Local grapes like Bittuni, Dabouki and Zeini, were among the varieties used. Grapes were delivered to the winery on a drove of donkeys traveling from Hebron. The children used to run after the donkeys to steal the odd bunch of grapes from the baskets. Wine was categorized as sweet or sour, but more than 95% was sweet. The Shor family winery also produced arak, brandy and vodka.

Later on, when the first glass bottles were produced, a family would most likely have only one, which they would have to refill again and again. Young daughters would have the task of being sent to the winery to fill the precious bottle, as the sons were working or studying. Thereupon they would wrap it in cloth for the swift, furtive walk home, so no-one inappropriate would render the precious wine un-kosher by looking at it, and so they would not inflame their Muslim neighbors by being seen with alcohol!

When Yitzhak passed away, the baton was passed onto his son, Shmuel Shor, and his legendary wife, Rosa. She was a formidable woman. She opened a wine store called Khamra Rosa in the Cotton Market. It was not the first shop selling wine and spirits, but because of Rosa’s character, it was the most famous and it was the first shop to operate like a wine bar. Her memory lives on. Arab elders still give respect today to a visiting member of the family, as soon as they hear they are related to Rosa.

IN 1925 the Shor Winery had to leave the Old City at the request of the British Mandate. They moved to Beit Israel. In the new winery, living quarters were on the top floor, the winery on the ground floor and the cellar, previously a water well, was in the basement. When Shmuel Shor passed away, Rosa took over the management of the winery, becoming the first ever female manager of a winery in Israel.

Glass became cheaper and wine gradually came to be sold in bottles. Bottling was done manually. Alicante became the main variety. Early labels were strictly informative, with basic typed information on a white background. Then when they began to be used for marketing purposes, labels became more colorful.

After the Shors had moved to Beit Israel, they occasionally had to load up a donkey to deliver wine to the shop in the Old City. According to family folklore, a youthful Shor was told to take the donkey and deliver the wine.

“But I don’t know the way,” he whined.

“Don’t worry, the donkey does,” was the adult’s reply. Sure enough, the donkey navigated the alleyways and the wine was delivered successfully.

The donkey folklore came alive for me when following the footsteps of the Shors in the Old City. By chance, I came across a photo hanging on the wall of an Arab restaurant of a donkey unmistakably carrying bottles of wine. Hilariously, I was swiftly told, “No, they are milk bottles,” by the owner who, presumably, as a Muslim, is forbidden to drink alcohol!

Two things surprised me about this ultra-Orthodox, Ashkenazi family. First, the family spoke Arabic, which was logical and practical, so they could communicate with their neighbors and suppliers. Second, the family served in the IDF. Unfortunately, in the War of

Independence, they had to recover from devastating blows.

In 1944, the company name was changed to Zion Winery. As the family had grown, the two brothers, who were partners, decided to split the business. Avraham Meir Shor's Zion Winery continued to focus on wine and grape juice, and Moshe Shalom Shor's new Shimshon Winery concentrated on spirits and liqueurs. There was a wall between the two production centers in the same building, and the folklore tells how sometimes the pervasive smell of arak would reach over into the winery.

Moshe Shalom Shor passed his Shimshon Winery onto his son-in-law and daughter. His other children founded new Shor owned wineries, which in time came to be known as Arza and Hacormim. However, Zion Winery was the one that continuously made wine since 1848.

In 1982, the Zion Winery moved to Mishor Adumim. The winery grew and expanded, but really took off in the 2000s. There were three family members who created a revolution. Moshe Shor was CEO. He had a fascination with machinery and equipment, and began a process of investing in the winery. I myself have witnessed the changes. They have built a serious, well-equipped winery that is spotlessly clean. When I visited not so long ago, there were incongruously a number of Chinese people in the winery.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Oh," I was told "they are installing a robot for the bottling line!"

THEN THERE was his nephew, Zvika Shor, who took over as winemaker from his father in 1992. What is unique to Zion Winery, though, is that it is not only owned and managed by the Shor family, but also after all these years, the winemaker, uniquely, is still a member of the family!

Zvika Shor is bright, friendly, with a Herzlian beard and striking blue eyes. He has absorbed the proud heritage of the Shor family, and lately has been at the center of a whirlwind of changes. It all began one harvest in 1995 when a grower rang him up and said, "I have some spare Cabernet Sauvignon. Can you use it?"

By that time Carignan was the main variety used, but Zvi thought no harm in trying, so he said yes and fermented the wine in a small fiberglass tank in the corner of the winery. When he leaned over and put his nose in the container, the power and depth

of the aromas was so much greater than anything he had ever had before. He was hooked. It was an epiphany moment. For the first time they purchased better quality grapes. After a lifetime in wine, with no ego and being unafraid to ask questions, Zvi Shor started his education again.

The third key to success was Yossi Shor, son of Moshe. He was the dynamic, creative marketing manager. The successes of Moshe in the winery and Zvika with the wines, was duplicated by Yossi outside the gates of the winery. He came with boundless energy and ideas, a new vision and a marketing plan. Both the quality of the wines and the look of the bottles was improved.

Then Yossi started his own initiative. He planted new vineyards, founded 1848 Winery, a small winery making handcrafted wines, and appointed a French-born, Bordeaux-trained winemaker. Leading consultants were employed covering the areas of viticulture, winemaking and marketing. Where Zion wines ended, 1848 began. Zion Winery was geared to mass-market wines, 1848 Winery was more for quality wine stores and restaurants. In the meantime, Zion Winery grew to become the sixth largest winery in Israel.

In 2007, the Terravino Competition was held in Eilat, and Zion Winery stole the show by winning four gold medals. I remember the incongruous setting as the white-shirted, black-frokked haredim went up to receive their well-earned trophies, in Eilat of all places! As Zvi said to me, "With food comes an appetite."

The late Moshe Shor passed away before his time,



ZION'S VIBRANT vintages offer great value for the money.

like his Biblical namesake, before seeing the final results of his work. However, now Zion Winery has been rebranded with a new logo and bright, eye-catching labels. The brands range from the entry level Palace, economy Imperial, mid-range Estate, premier label Capital, to the flagship Crown label. I tasted the Moscato (NIS 20.90), Estate Chardonnay (NIS 40), Imperial Cabernet Sauvignon (NIS 30) and Estate Shiraz (NIS 40). These are fresh, fruity, vibrant drinking wines, offering great value for money.

The story of the Shor family and Zion Winery represents both the history of wine in Israel and the modern history of Jerusalem. The branding is new, the wines contemporary, but the story reaches back into the middle of the

19th century. This "new," old winery deserves attention and respect!

The writer has advanced Israeli wines for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com



THE LATE Moshe Shor, legendary CEO, with son Zvika, who took over as winemaker.

Right: WINEMAKER ZVIKA SHOR in the state-of-the-art winery.