

What goes around comes around



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The first question any visitor asks is whether we have any of our own grape varieties. Formerly, we would say no, and then offer our wines made from Cabernet Sauvignons, Merlots and Chardonnays. Now, however, we have some new local varieties that are creating a noise among the wine intelligentsia.

The pioneers are the Cremisan Winery and Dr. Shibi Drori. Cremisan Monastery was founded over 125 years ago in Beit Jala, a Christian Arab village near Bethlehem. It grew grapes and made wine to earn a living. However, in the past 10 years, it has invested in the winery and brought over one of the most illustrious wine consultants in the world (Italian Riccardo Cotarella). It then began focusing on indigenous varieties such as Hamdani, Jandali, Dabouki and Baladi Asmar. Its Hamdani Jandali, a white wine blend, gained plaudits from international critics. I was certainly pleasantly surprised to visit a restaurant in New York and find the Baladi being served by the glass there!

Drori, winemaker of Gvaot Winery and agriculture and oenology research coordinator at Ariel University, has been undertaking groundbreaking research on indigenous varieties. He and his colleagues have identified over 120 local varieties, of which 20 show wine potential. The new interest in Israel in these local varieties came about because of his research.

The latest exciting launch was by Recanati Winery. It has introduced the first-ever red wine made from a local grape variety called Bittuni, alongside the latest expression of their Marawi (a white wine.) Both varieties are *Vitis vinifera*, the same spe-

cies used to make wine, but hundreds of years of selection have meant they have become over time more suitable as table grapes.

Some of these local varieties go back a long way. There is a possible mention of the Hamdani and Jandali varieties in the Talmud. The original text is close enough to make it a likely reference, and there is an even clearer reference by Rabbi Menahem de Lunzano, who lived in Jerusalem from 1550 to 1625.

Furthermore, when Baron Edmond de Rothschild founded the modern Israeli wine industry, he planted Mediterranean varieties from the south of France, such as Carignan and Alicante Grenache, and varieties from Bordeaux such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Yet before that, when wine-making was still a domestic industry, wineries used these same indigenous grapes, grown in Arab vineyards in Bethlehem and Hebron. In those days it was mainly to make kiddush wine for the Jewish market, but there was also a demand to produce sacramental wine “from the Holy Land” for the Christian market. It is poignant that the varieties used then should be returning now. It seems that what goes around comes around.

Back to the present, both the Bittuni and Marawi were grown at an elevation of 850 meters in chalky soils. The vines were trellised on a Hebron pergola, which is like a vine sukka with the grapes hanging down almost at eye level.

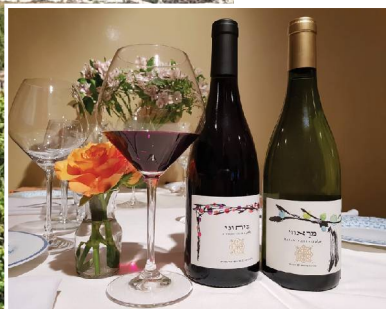
This is not ideal for “growing wine,” but is perfectly adequate for growing table grapes. For a start, there are no bad backs from bending to harvest those precious bunches.

The grapes are grown by a Palestinian grower, the Bittuni near Hebron and the Marawi near Bethlehem. Hebron is the area where 85% of Palestinian grapes are grown. However, most are not made into wine, but are used as table grapes,

THE CREMISAN Winery vineyard where the Hamdani, Jandali and Dabouki varieties are grown. (Courtesy)



THE CREMISAN Monastery was founded over 125 years ago in Beit Jala, a Christian-Arab village near Bethlehem. Today, it is a pioneer in producing local varieties. (Courtesy)



MARAWI AND BITTUNI – two Holy Land varieties by Palestinian growers and Israeli winemakers. (Eli Prechter)



(Courtesy)

for raisins or to produce syrup and jam. The syrup is a kind of grapes molasses known as dibs. The natural grape juice is boiled gently on low heat to produce a natural, sweet grape syrup. It is a popular ingredient in Palestinian cuisine.

Tractors can't enter these vineyards, so donkeys are used, as they have been in this part of the world for centuries. Nothing new here. The Shor family is fond of relating how, in the mid-19th-century, its grapes were carried to the winery by donkeys, and the children woke up to a courtyard full of braying donkeys! *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

The Marawi was first launched with the 2014 vintage, which created a great deal of noise in the international press and drew worldwide attention to Drori's pioneering work. (Marawi is in fact a synonym for Hamdani. Historically, the Marawi was the name used west of Jerusalem, and Hamdani was used more in the Bethlehem-Hebron area.) However, the first wine was certainly interesting but not great. I suppose the interest was less in the wine per se, and more in the fact that a wine had been produced from an ancient local variety. The fact that it existed at all dwarfed the fact of whether it was any good!

By the way, there is nothing wrong in that. A wine is never just a drink, and you can't disconnect what you sip from its place of origin and its personal history – and the story in this instance was very special.

The 2015 Marawi was far better, showing good minerality and a balancing acidity.

The 2016 has just been launched, and it is also good

but different. It is more aromatic and shows more personality. As for the Bittuni, it was quite a find. It has the lightness and freshness of a Gamay and the perfume reminiscent of a Pinot Noir or Grenache.

The Marawi and Bittuni are fascinating additions to the local wine scene. They are products of a noble partnership. These are Holy Land varieties, with a Palestinian (Muslim) grower and an Israeli (Jewish) winemaker. It sounds like a joint venture with more hope than Oslo... and at the end of all the unrequited hope, at least you have a bottle of wine out of it with which to drown your sorrows!

Interestingly, whereas Recanati chose Marawi, and has even planted Marawi in its Upper Galilee vineyards, Drori himself chose to go with the Jandali, producing a wine made from the variety at his Gvaot Winery situated in the central highlands region.

As for Dabouki, it is a special variety because, apart from being a dominant variety in Hebron, it was also well planted in Israel. Here it was used for surreptitious blending, or it was distilled to make brandy. Of course, in those days, Israel had a booming brandy market, which has largely disappeared.

The pioneer here of Dabouki is Avi Feldstein, who makes handcrafted wine in his own Feldstein Winery, and his Dabouki comes from 40-year-old vines in the Mount Carmel region.

Argaman is also an Israeli variety, but does not have ancient roots like the others. It was developed here and is a cross between Souzoa, the Portuguese variety, and Carignan.

Cremisan Star of Bethlehem Hamdani Jandali 2016

Aromatic with tropical fruit, fresh nose, and a broad flavor in the mouth. Slightly lacking acidity but represents good value. NIS 55.

Jezreel Pet-Nat Dabouki 2016

A *pétillant naturel* wine, known as a Pét-Nat, made from 35-year-old Dabouki grapes. A fun wine, lightly sparkling, with aromas of green apple. Great label and beer bottle closure. NIS 89.

Recanati Marawi 2016

This has an attractive flowery nose, and though less mineral than the 2015, it has a well-balanced finish. NIS 99.

Gvaot Gofna Jandali 2016

Flinty nose with flowery fruit and pronounced acidity on the finish. NIS 115.

Feldstein Dabouki 2015

This is dominated by a nose of honey and wet straw, while there is fresh finish. Slightly funky, but it is an authentic expression of the most Israeli of the indigenous varieties. NIS 135.

Segal Rechesim Dovev Argaman 2014

Deep-colored with aromas of black fruit, well-integrated oak and sweet vanilla. It has a taste of ripe plum and forest fruits with a refreshing tannic, slightly acidic finish. NIS 79.

Recanati Bittuni 2016

Light, cherry-berry fruit, easy drinking with good balancing acidity. Serve it chilled. Enjoyable wine. I thought it was very drinkable and it is comparatively low alcohol, too. NIS 99.

Jezreel Valley Argaman 2015

A quality red wine with good berry fruit, a hint of spice and a herbal note. I like the texture which makes the wine refreshing. It has a clean but lengthy finish. NIS 160.

The first Argaman wine was launched as recently as the early 1990s. It was a grape bred for color and blending, and was not considered very distinguished.

One imaginative winemaker thought differently. This was the aforementioned Feldstein, then-winemaker of Segal Wines. He planted Argaman in the Upper Galilee in 1999 and tried to treat it with the respect he thought it deserved. The result was an award-winning wine that made people think again about this variety.

Today, Jezreel Valley, a small boutique winery that specializes in "Israeliness," makes a very good Argaman from old vine vineyards in the Mount Carmel area.

The successful owners of the famous Taybeh Brewing Company have recently also opened a winery in the West Bank. They sell international varietals under their Nadim label, but they are experimenting with Zeini, another local white variety, and Bittuni.

I love the way the new interest in these old varieties crosses boundaries and political divides. After all, wine is above politics, isn't it?

So interesting times lie ahead, as we learn more about these fascinating varieties. Keep a lookout for Argaman, Baladi and Bittuni among the reds, and Dabouki, Jandali, Marawi/Hamdani and Zeini amongst the whites. The ancient and old become new. Maybe these varieties will be part of Israel's future. They are certainly part of our past. ■

The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for over 30 years and has been referred to as the "English voice of Israeli wine." www.adammontefiore.com