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wine talk

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Jewish wine



# Jewish wine

*For Israeli winemakers, the kosher wine market is not only a benefit but also a blessing and a necessity*

By ADAM MONTEFIORE

**W**ine has brought me in touch with many worlds. Firstly, most obviously, is the world of agriculture. Wine is an agricultural product. The place where the vineyards are situated and the way the vines are grown are crucial to the quality of the wine. In the trade, we talk about growing wine, not grapes. You can't make good wine from bad grapes.

Then there are the science and the art of winemaking. Each winemaker veers toward one or the other. Some wines are made more technically and others are made with artistic freedom, but in the end it is a combination of both that makes winemaking so fascinating.

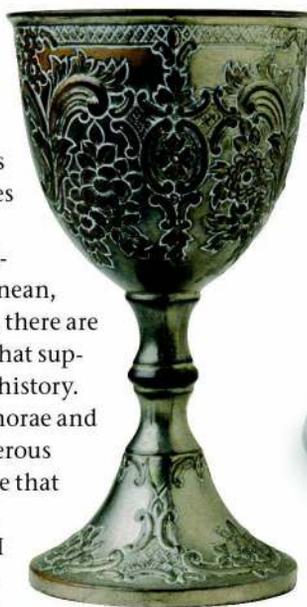
The wine trade is known as the world's second-oldest profession, so it also puts you in touch with history. (This is a family newspaper, so we won't go into the oldest profession!) The story of our sliver of land from the earliest biblical times until today may easily be told through the story of wine. Thucydides wrote that man became

civilized when he began to cultivate the vine. Californian wine icon Robert Mondavi used to quote Petronius's statement that "Wine is life." It is true that it permeates everything.

With history comes archeology. In the Eastern Mediterranean, where wine culture was born, there are ongoing archeological finds that support the evidence of the long history. Findings of cellar caves, amphorae and goblets, let alone all the numerous wine presses, paint the picture that wine is as old as history itself.

Gastronomy is also a world I have entered thanks to wine. There is a holy trinity of wine, people and food. Wine is not made to be tasted alone but to accompany a meal with friends and family. If one of the legs of this three-legged stool is missing, it is just not the same experience. The stool collapses.

With appreciation of fine wine comes the appreciation of good food. Together,



you reach the mathematical impossibility of one plus one equals three. One enhances the other, but neither is a whole without its partners. Pity the person who goes from formal tasting to tasting, as many wine lovers do. They think they are experiencing wine, but they are missing the point.

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Then there is the world of religion. Wine is of fundamental importance to Judaism and Christianity. As Jews, every Shabbat and every festival is sanctified by a glass of wine. At Purim, we are entreated to drink a great deal; at Passover, we have to drink four glasses; Shavuot is a time for a cheese and wine party; and Succot is really the wine harvest festival. Need I go on?

For Christians, the Communion centers on this exalted beverage. Wine is one of the building blocks of Western Judeo-Christian society.

When Israeli wine grows up, it wants to market itself as an Eastern Mediterranean wine in the wider wine world. It should be sold alongside the wines of Greece, Cyprus, Turkey and Lebanon on the shelves and be included on wine lists. Jews may buy it because it is Israeli. Christians may be interested because it is from the Holy Land. Wine geeks will be interested because to them, Israel is a new, slightly exotic wine country. The sommelier will take a look because he may see Israel as the quality producer of the Eastern Mediterranean wine region.

However, kosher? The K-word is barely mentioned because it is too much associated with the image and quality of sweet sacramental kiddush wine.

We should be humble. Until recently, even tiny Cyprus produced more wine than Israel. We are not as important as we sometimes think. There are about 35 countries that make more wine annually than Israel. Even Gallo of Sonoma, the boutique winery belonging to the largest winery in the world, is larger than the Israeli wine industry all together. There is even one single vineyard in Monterey, California, that yields more tons at harvest than all the vineyards of Israel.

We look enviously at New Zealand wine. It is a relatively small country that succeeded in making quality wines, creating a quality image, while maintaining the highest average price for wine sold in the UK and the US. Israel is chronically bad at selling itself. In this respect, the failures in foreign policy and diplomacy are no different. One prominent politician once said, "We don't need *hasbara* because our story is so good." How wrong he was.

We are far from being a New Zealand. Even Lebanon and Turkey have generic bodies marketing their wine brand overseas. Israel? Apart from the short-lived Handcrafted Wines of Israel that I founded and managed 13 years ago,

there is nothing. It is each winery for itself, and Brand Israel suffers.

The largest 12 wineries have more than 90 percent of the wine market, and they all produce kosher wines. However, most of the small boutique, domestic and garagiste wineries are not kosher. Therefore, we have the paradox: Most Israeli wine is kosher, but the majority of Israeli wineries are not.

I, for one, am proud to produce kosher wine that Jews everywhere can drink, and it would be crazy from a marketing point of view to make wine that more than 20% of your target audience can't touch. So for combined reasons of religious belief, a feeling of *klal Yisrael* and economic expediency, making kosher wines is in vogue. Even some top-quality small wineries like Flam, Tulip and Vitkin, that previously produced non-kosher wines, have become kosher. Furthermore, Pelter founded a new sister winery called Matar to enter this market.

All this is helped by the fact that the quality of Israel's kosher wines is so good. After all, we want to be good Jews *and* make quality wine! Well, Israeli wine that "happens also to be kosher" is good enough to score 94 points in *Robert Parker's Wine Advocate*, to gain four stars in Hugh Johnson's *Pocket Wine* book and to win the Decanter International Trophy and the award of Best Winery at Vin Italy.

However, we need to understand that there is massive overproduction throughout the world. More serious wine-pro-

ducing countries than Israel are struggling to sell their wines. Supply swamps demand. More than 90% of wines that are sold cost under \$10 a bottle. Most Israeli wines sold in export are over \$10 a bottle! It is well nigh impossible for Israel to really compete in the mass market because of high price and small quantities.

It is therefore a great benefit that kosher Israeli wineries have the kosher market. Who else will drink all these wines from the vineyards we keep planting, as though the market were certain and selling wine was the easiest thing in the world? If you look at it like that, the kosher wine market is not only a benefit, but it is also a blessing and a necessity!

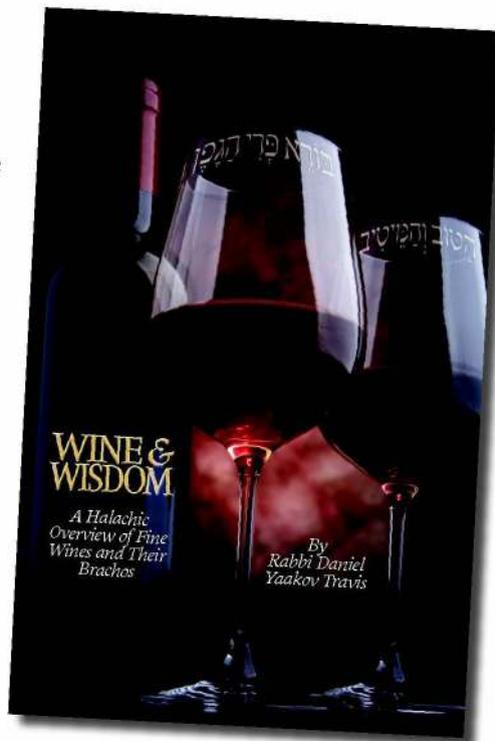
The kosher wine laws are the oldest in the world. The agricultural laws (*orla*, *shmita*, etc.) are from the Bible as is the prohibition against using wines used for idol worship. And the other laws, such as building a fence around wine, come from the Babylonian exile 2,500 years ago. There is a whole range of Jewish religious laws with respect to wine, but they are spread out all over the place. It is hard to know where to begin. That is, until now.

A new book will soon be published that will be of interest to the *talmid hacham* and to the wine lover drinking kosher wines. It is by Rabbi Daniel Yaakov Travis and is called *Wine and Wisdom*.

His introduction explains the benefits of the book better than I can. He writes: "Wine connoisseurs have developed a taste for fine wines... I encourage them to take their expertise one step further and to add the *halachos* of wine drinking to their repertoire of knowledge... In-depth knowledge of the *halachos* of wine reframes the entire wine drinking experience... I am confident that anyone who appreciates fine wine will find that this book enhances the spiritual joy of wine drinking."

I couldn't put it better myself. The book is fascinating and beautifully illustrated.

*Wine and Wisdom* is published by Feldheim in the US at \$24.95. In Israel, it will cost NIS 79.



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