



ERAN HARCAVI is happiest working in his vineyards. (Eran Harcavi)

THE HAR Bracha vineyard in the Shomron Hills, one of the areas Harcavi was pleased to help develop. (Har Bracha Winery)



## SITTING AMONG HIS VINES



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**A**fter a lifetime in the Agriculture Ministry, Eran Harcavi, someone with his finger on the pulse of what was happening in our vineyards during the past 30 years, abruptly retired and returned to be a grower.

He began in the late 1980s when Carmel had one of its most severe financial crises. Many growers were not paid and as a result of this and the likelihood of a depressing future, many quit agriculture altogether. This black period, led into the 1990s, when the modern, quality-driven wine industry started to take shape.

When Harcavi began his career, Carmel Mizrahi had 75% of the market and there were only 10 other wineries. There were 19,000 dunams of vineyards. Most of the vineyards were situated in the southern Mount Carmel and in the area southeast of Tel Aviv. The main grape grown was Carignan. The largest-selling wine was Selected Emerald Riesling. Wineries had names like the aforementioned Carmel Mizrahi, WEST-Stock, Eliaz, Askalon, Efrat, Arza and Zion. Most of the wineries produced spirits and liqueurs. Any talk of wine quality centered mainly around the Golan Heights.

Some 30 years later, Barkan is now the largest winery. There are 250 to 300 wineries and four of them produce over six million bottles a year. There are 55,000 dunams of vineyards. The most planted areas are the Golan Heights, Galilee and the Judean *shefela* (foothills). The best wine regions are today considered to be the higher-elevation Upper Galilee,

Golan, Judean Hills and there are newish regions, (at least in modern times), such as the Negev and central mountains. The main grape variety is Cabernet Sauvignon. Wineries now use new names like Carmel Winery, Barkan, Binyamina, Segal, Teperberg, Hayotzer and 1848 Winery to signify the move away from liquid religion to quality table wine. Most of the wineries focus on wine and do not produce spirits today. Today, the largest selling Israeli wine is Mount Hermon Red, and the largest selling brand is Blue Nun!

HARCAVI WAS born, brought up and still lives in Moshav Segula. There he received his early practical agricultural education looking after the pecan orchard in his back yard. After his agricultural studies, he became the guide or consultant for orchards for the Agriculture Ministry. However, vines and vineyards drew him in, like a moth to a flame.

People like Prof. Ben Ami Bravdo, Hanan Bazak and Ronald Kimelman turned his head, influenced him and taught him. He was an eager student. There is something magic about a vineyard, he told me. The simple fruit of the vine has the potential to turn into something elevated like wine.

"Tourists will visit vineyards" he said. "They don't visit apple orchards."

He explains that someone who gets into vines, ends up specializing in vines because it is so absorbing.

The bug bit deep. Harcavi planted his own vineyard in Moshav Segula in the early 1990s. He chose Colombard and Merlot, and sold his fruit to Segal Winery.

He began to travel around the country, visiting vineyards, talking to growers, offering advice and became a

guru figure in the industry. He found time to travel to study vineyards in Australia, France, South Africa and Spain. As such, he played a key role in the development of various wine regions.

He was a prime supporter of developing vineyards in the Negev. Experiments were originally made with irrigation using salt water from deep wells. Then they used treated sewage from local army bases and a prison. The creativeness of the Israeli agriculturist! Harcavi led the move to plant experimental plantings in Ramat Ha Negev and Mitzpe Ramon to try to discover which varieties would be suitable there. After observing results, he now suggests Chenin Blanc, Colombard, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Petite Sirah as being his suitable for the desert terroir.

He also took a lead in the vineyard developments in Gush Etzion, where there are now 800 dunams of vineyards. White varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc, Roussanne and Gewurztraminer are particularly suitable for this high-altitude region. Later he explored the potential of planting vineyards in the Shomron Hills, and guided a new generation of vineyard owners there. All the growers together would visit vineyard after vineyard together, learning as a group from practical experience, over a long period of time. He remembers it as a fantastic educational process. Today there are 2,000 dunams of vineyards in the Shomron hills, a particularly successful region for Merlot.

Harcavi has seen enormous changes. He reminds me there were once watering tables, instructing the grower when and how much to water. Of course, today, every decision is based on scientific information. In those days, a winemaker would rarely enter a vineyard. The



winemaker would likely meet the grower only on the day of the harvest. Today the winemaker makes wine in the vineyard, plot by plot. Then, the criteria for success was purely quantity. Harcavi witnessed how the measure for success gradually became quality instead of quantity. Nowadays payment depends on parameters based on the quality potential of the resulting wine. The vineyard providing the award-winning Cabernet Sauvignon receives a different protocol to the vineyard supplying Tirosh grape juice. In other words, the cost and depth of attention depend on where the final product will sit in the quality spectrum.

Harcavi is a great believer in the vineyard expressing its character through its wine. He says not every wine has to be a blockbuster medal winner, or with the same oak aging regime. Each region or vineyard has its own best wine and they will differ. The grower and winemaker need to make the right wine for the vineyard.

Some 30 years ago, much of the grape juice was made from food grapes. Today, with the surplus, nearly all the grape juice is made from wine grapes. There is some interest here in indigenous food grapes being used to make wine, like Marawi and Bittuni. His view is that this trend is a gimmick, and even if it is a nice gimmick, these varieties just do not have the potential to make wines of real quality.

He was involved in bringing varieties like Gewurztraminer, Roussanne, Pinotage, Tannat, Malbec, Grenache and Mourvedre to Israel. Of course, this was important, but I had to mention the Leaf Roll virus that has devastated Israeli vineyards. He said new plant material was brought in from UC Davis in California in good faith. Neither the experts in Israel or even in California, had any idea that the plant material was not absolutely clean.

IN 1974, the official wine regions of Israel were set and registered in the two main export markets, the USA and the European Community. However, the regions defy logic, are difficult to understand and do not conform to geography or topography. So, we have Golan being part of the Galilee, the Lower and Upper Galilee being lumped together, Zichron Yaacov being part of Samaria and a region called Samson, which no one knows where it is. There are sub-regions registered like Nazareth, where there are no vineyards are at all. It is mind-blowing that a wine industry that is so advanced, could have wine regions so out of date.

However, Eran Harcavi representing the Agriculture Ministry, sat with the late Shlomo Cohen, of the Wine Institute, to come up with a new proposal. He noted



the old regions were set horizontally, yet Israel's natural topography is divided vertically. He carved Israel up into new regions based on topography, climate, soils and common sense. The Upper Galilee, Lower Galilee and Golan Heights were separated. The mountains down the spine of the country were called Central Mountains (including the Shomron and Judean Hills.) The area from Binyamina to Gadera was referred to as the Coastal Region.

It makes such good sense, but was not implemented. Why? The reason is that the decision makers in the Wine and Grapes Board are the big wineries themselves, each with their own interests. So 15 years later, we are still stuck with our outdated regions from well before the wine industry took its current shape. Harcavi firmly believes that decisions of this kind should be taken with professional considerations, without input from wineries and winemakers. The foxes can't guard the chicken coup. Well, we are still waiting. However, for this initiative, Israeli wine owes Harcavi a great deal. Furthermore, whenever the new wine regions are ever implemented, they will surely not differ much from his proposal.

However, there is progress. The Israel winemaker's association, IPEVO, produced their own map, as described in a previous article. At least we have a reference point and it may finally push the official authorities to get their act together.

**THE WINE**  
grower standing  
among his vines,  
and none shall  
make him afraid.  
(Eran Harcavi)

**HARCAVI WAS**  
particularly  
keen to develop  
vineyards in the  
Negev.  
(Nana Winery)

Eran Harcavi is quiet, humble and modest – a true salt-of-the-earth person. He retired from the Ministry of Agriculture at 61 years old, because he felt a distinct lack of support for the sector. Disappointed, he chose to turn his back on his life's work and return to his beloved vineyard, where he does all the work himself. He is fortified by and keeps in touch with the number of growers who contact him asking for advice.

He is left with memories. Among the winemakers he worked with, he has special respect for Eran Goldwasser (Yatir Winery), Ed Salzberg (ex Barkan Winery), Avi Feldstein (now Feldstein Winery, ex Segal) and Assaf Paz (Vitkin Winery). As for some favorite wines, he mentions Galil Mountain Yiron, Yarden Malbec and Tabor Sauvignon Blanc.

Now instead of being the country's viticulturist, the benefit of his expertise and experience, will from now be focused on purely his own vineyard. It is a pity from my point of view, but to paraphrase the Prophet Micah, Eran Harcavi will from now be "sitting amongst his vineyard, and none shall make him afraid." We wish him a retirement of peace and tranquility – and also fulfillment and contentment in his new-old life as a grower.

*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](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*