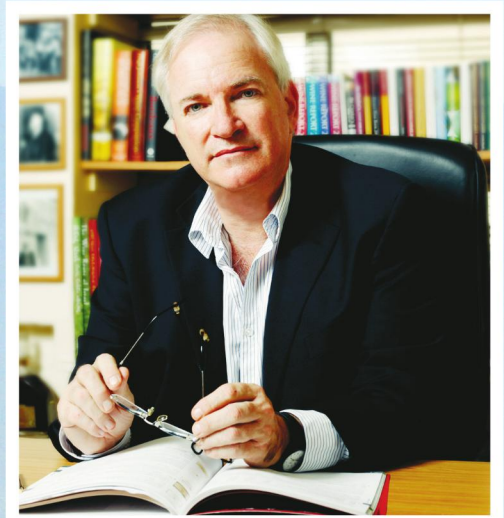


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WINE TALK

The politics of wine

Wine has been revered in this land since biblical times, but today there are those who try to tarnish the tannins with BDS



Adam Montefiore is known as the ambassador of Israeli wine and the English voice of Israeli wine. He regularly writes about wine in Israeli and English publications.

A COMMUNICATIONS post is seen above a Golan Heights Wiener vineyard. (Yonathan Weitzman/Reuters)

• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Throughout our history, wine has played a crucial role. The planting of vineyards and production of wine helped develop the country. Farming villages or settlements often set the political tone; wine was at the forefront at every stage of Israel's history.

The vineyards planted in the pre-state era are an example. The idea of working

the land and making it our own was adopted by the Labor Zionist movement. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, worked at the Rishon Le Zion Cellars; and Levi Eshkol, Israel's third prime minister, managed the vineyards, underscoring the importance of the industry in the new Israel. When Theodor Herzl visited Israel in 1898, he was taken to see the Carmel Winery as an active example of the Zionist dream come true. Carmel developed and advanced

the new Israeli wine industry through all the challenges of building the state.

Wine production was prominent enough an issue to attract the intervention of key politicians. When Joseph Seltzer from Hungary wanted to found a winery in 1952 on the site of a disused perfume factory in Binyamina, there were disputes regarding approvals. Only when Ben-Gurion, then prime minister, became involved was the issue solved, and Eliasz Winery, now renamed



THE YARDEN wine from Golan Heights winery has won critical acclaim. (Baz Ratner/Reuters)



EUROPEAN PROPOSALS to label settlement products are a worry for vineyards beyond the Green Line. (Illustrative/Baz Ratner/Reuters)



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THE VISITOR center at the Binyamina Winery. (Courtesy)

Binyamina, was formed.

Political intervention was also apparent in the development of the Golan Heights Winery. The Wine Growers Cooperative opposed it and had a person of influence spearheading the opposition. Pesah Grupper was the minister of agriculture and veteran member of the Wine Growers Cooperative, later the chairman. The future of the new winery was ensured only due to the strong intervention of Ariel Sharon, then trade and industry minister. He managed to secure the approvals to facilitate the move to its permanent premises in Katzrin.

WINE CAN put a region on the map. The positive attributes of settlement pioneering, Israeli agriculture and advanced technology combined in the Golan Heights Winery. The Golan area came to be associated with the success of its wines. Its Yarden wines have won international acclaim. Wine became the most visual export from the Golan Heights and contributed to the fact that this area, new to Israel after the 1967 war, was swiftly adopted by the Israeli consensus.

The area known as the territories (the West Bank/Judea and Samaria) was more politically fraught. I prefer to call it, from a wine region point of view, the Central Mountains. Companies opening businesses there received favorable rates and inducements. Barkan Winery was founded there. When the territories became more of an issue, Barkan moved to Hulda, becoming Israel's largest exporter and one of the country's largest wineries.

In the past 10 to 15 years, a number of new wineries opened in the Central Mountains. It is in their interest to show Israelis there as placid-farmer-types

planting vineyards and making wine. Again, wine is at the center of the political issues of the day; they are using wine and wine tourism in exactly the same way as Carmel Winery and the Golan Heights Winery were used to settle the country and the Golan before them.

Those with an anti-Israeli agenda like BDS and relabeling proponents in European countries are doomed to fail if their objectives are to cause financial damage. Most Israeli wine is sold in Israel, and most of what is sold abroad is channeled to the Jewish market. The late legendary wine critic Daniel Rogov noted: "There are domestic and overseas customers who simply won't buy the wine because it comes from the occupied West Bank. In contrast, there are many others who will look for those wines precisely because they come from there." Sales will not be affected. Maybe the bad press will even boost sales.

The main damage is one of image, yet wine remains a most presentable product, representing the land, agriculture, technology and Israel's creative energy. However, bashing of Israel through wine is certainly not new. I remember the crisis when I represented Yarden, and the London store Selfridges succumbed to pro-Palestinian

protesters outside the store and delisted the wine more than 15 years ago. Meetings were held with the management, and the wine was reinstated. Similar issues with Sweden's Systembolaget and more recently the German store KaDeWe also involved the Golan Heights Winery.

Only the most fervent anti-Israeli campaigners categorize the Golan Heights as politically problematic, and yet it is included in all the propaganda as being part of the "occupied territories." When people rage against the territories and include the Golan Heights, their whole argument is undermined. It is a massive failure of Israeli diplomacy that the Golan Heights still has this mark of Cain on it.

After all, the Golan has been annexed to Israel, there are no Palestinians there, and the adjoining country is Syria, which is in the process of disintegration. Who do the critics want Israel to hand the Golan back to? The hypocrisy of it all! It is not even in any Western country's interest that the Golan should go back to any of the existing players, but the blan-



'MOST PEOPLE in the wine trade believe wine should be separated from politics,' the author writes. (Courtesy)

ket approach continues.

Many see everything in Israel as political, but at least wine gives you a glimmer of hope to present the most acceptable face of Israel. You don't always receive the welcome I did when presenting wine to Polish sommeliers when one asked me: "Why should we sell Israeli wine when you murder Palestinian children?" They don't teach you to answer that in wine school! However, wine is one of Israel's finest quality exports and arguably Israel's best ambassador. Reactions like that are rare, especially in Poland, where I have many wine connections.

WINE HAS certainly made me a lot of friends. The people I have met with a glass in hand include right-wingers from the territories, left-wing pacifists from Tel Aviv, ultra-Orthodox haredim, Israeli Arabs, Palestinian Christians, not to mention winemakers from Lebanon and Turkey. We have absolutely nothing in common apart from an interest in wine. So I see wine as a bridge and unifier rather than something divisive. I wish people here would drink more wine than coffee, and then perhaps it would be a calmer place!

Most people in the wine trade believe wine should be separated from politics. You don't need a flag to grow grapes, and wine should be judged on quality. In other words, it should be above the fray. The wine from a vineyard in Alsace did not change because it was from France or Germany. It was still the same terroir regardless of the country.

After 130 years of pioneering, wineries and vineyards are still in the center of the Israel discourse. Only recently a prominent right-wing politician described those Israelis that did not buy or write about wine from the territories as enemies of the state and agents of Palestinian propaganda. Others see a difference between Eretz Israel and the State of Israel and refuse to touch a bottle from over the Green Line. And that is a debate within Israel.

Every restaurant and individual must be allowed to make the decision to buy or not based on personal opinion, as with every consumer product. The freedom of what to buy without harassment is a basic right. It is only a drink made from grapes, after all! Thankfully, there are enough quality Israeli wineries of every type, from every corner of the country, to provide a great deal of choice, whatever your political persuasion or religious affiliation. However, I do not believe in boycotts on principle and believe they drastically weaken the arguments of those that propose them.

Wine continues to be an attraction for the full spectrum of political views, covering every corner of the country, whether disputed or undisputed. So it seems those that want to glorify or vilify Israel, from outside or within, will continue to do so, using wine as the medium. ■