

# The wild man of Jish

*Gaby Sadan, one of the most talented winemakers in Israel and a totally free spirit, makes wine in his own way in Kerem Shvo*

■ By ADAM MONTEFIORE



The Israeli wine world for all its variety has a lot of sameness about it. Vineyards look pretty much the same.

They are planted in more or less the same way, with the vines standing straight like soldiers to be suitable for mechanical harvesting. The grapes will as likely as not include the all-conquering Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot, which are grown everywhere outside Israel and within.

The winery will undoubtedly be a clean, sterile area with a few oak barrels giving a flavor of tradition, and spotless stainless steel tanks providing a taste of technology. There will likely be a bar or comfort zone or even a visitor's center for meeting customers and selling wines.

The winemaker will be either an enthusiast whose hobby has become a business or a smiling graduate of some foreign university who did a course, followed by a stage of a harvest or two in another country and then returned to become a winemaker.

There is usually an ongoing dance between the grower, who is a farmer and grows grapes, and the winemaker who wants to grow wine. Who leads in this merry dance is usually the grower, and the winemaker tries to catch up, educate, enthrall and impose his controls.

The wine will be made in the standard international style which has become the norm. The reds will be full-bodied, over-ripe, high on alcohol and jammy. The whites will be full of tropical aromas, "nice to drink" but lacking follow-through and an underlying character or a sense of place.

Depressing? OK, I am certainly looking at

the cup half empty instead of half full and am intentionally giving a cynical overview. There is a reason. I want to introduce you to one of Israel's most exciting young wineries, Kerem Shvo, owned by Gaby Sadan, who is one of the most talented winemakers in Israel and a totally free spirit. He is a master of thinking out of the box at the same time as being a proponent of the *laissez-faire* style of winemaking.

Sadan started in fairly respectable fashion. He studied winemaking at Dijon in France, worked in Bordeaux and Burgundy. Afterwards, he went on to gain experience in California and Australia, as well as more experience in France. He spent far longer than the average winemaker in learning his trade, gathering information and experiencing winemaking in different countries. The long period of apprenticeship suggests a patience, thoroughness and thirst for knowledge.

In 1998 he returned to Israel and joined the Golan Heights Winery, the most advanced winery with regard to technology, under the legendary chief winemaker, Victor Schoenfeld. He became responsible for the red wines. There could not be more difference between the Golan Heights Winery and Shvo Vineyards or Victor Schoenfeld and Gaby Sadan, and yet they are both masters of their art.

In 2000, Sadan moved to Galil Mountain to become the winemaker of this new winery. He was there for six years and gained a name for his unoaked Galil Mountain reds, great drinking wines, and the great value, quality prestige blend Yiron. In 2006 he left to start his own venture.

Like most wineries in Israel, his started with a vineyard; but uniquely in this instance, the site was chosen, the varieties were selected and planted by him, the winemaker. He chose a site at 800 meters altitude between Dovev and Sasa in the Upper Galilee. Instead of planting the stalwarts like Cabernet, Merlot and Chardonnay, he chose Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, which are all well known from the South of France, and Barbera, prominent in Piedmont in Italy for the reds. Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc, which thrive in the Loire Valley, were the whites.

Basically in an industry affected by internationalization and globalization, Sadan does everything differently. The vineyard reeks of character and individuality. The soils are limestone with slate in areas. The Grenache and Mourvèdre are planted in low bush vines. There is a full cover crop between the vines. He is a believer in self-sustainable viticulture, using compost and no herbicides.

He named his winery Kerem Shvo (Shvo



get in the way of the principal objective: to grow wine.

At the winery, everything is different. The stainless tanks are rectangular, not round. The barrels are large, not small, and new oak is thankfully scarce.

The first wine was produced from the 2009 harvest. Harvesting is by hand. Yields are very low. In making the wine, Sadan also follows a totally individual route. The Sauvignon Blanc, for example, is hand harvested, whole clusters pressed and fermented using wild yeast in used 400-liter barrels and then aged in barrels. This is contrary in almost every way to the usual methods of making Sauvignon Blanc in Israel.

His red wine is a GSMB blend. In Australia, the letters GSM signify a blend of Grenache Syrah Mourvèdre. The B is the Barbera. The Grenache contributes perfumed fruit, the Syrah spice, the Mourvèdre tannin and texture, and the Barbera acidity.

Gaby Sadan is a well-set man usually wearing T-shirts and shorts, with a mop of red hair and a full beard, probably not unlike the biblical Esau (referring to his hair color and the description “he was a hairy man”).

He is a person who likes to take full responsibility and only truly relies on himself. I remember when the new Galil Mountain Winery opened and I was the initial export manager, he was checking my English text as though it were written by a non-English speaking Israeli. A crazy perfectionist yes, but this is a welcome trait shared by the very best winemakers.

He is a *gingie* not only in color but also in character and does not suffer fools gladly. On the other hand, he is incredibly patient in the vineyard and winery, totally non-interventionist, allowing inordinately long

fermentations without interference. The vineyard and grapes are allowed to express themselves in the final wine.

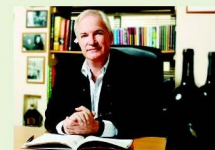
He is a quiet talker, explaining his way with passion, usually with his head cocked slightly to one side as though in inquisitive mode. He wants to make white wines that are less flamboyantly aromatic, with a greater flavor and minerality on the middle palate that gives a sense of place.

Regarding red wines, he believes in these Mediterranean varieties, which most agree have a great future in Israel; and Barbera, where the success here has yet to be proven. Interestingly, he is not necessarily trying to make a big Mediterranean style wine but succeeds in making a wine that seductively draws you to take another sip because it is chunky but refreshing.

The wines are not kosher. Sadan is too much of a hands-on winemaker to pass on the responsibilities to any *mashgiah*, but the wines are excellent, original and are priced very reasonably. His journey is invigorating because it represents a back to basics. Everyone interested in the future direction of Israeli wine is following his way with great curiosity.

Shvo Vineyards is an artisan winery whose wines are handcrafted and enticing. *Vive la différence et la qualité!* ■

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Vineyards) after his mother. Considering his *raison d'être* as a wine grower, it is totally appropriate that the winery would be named after the vineyard.

He set up a winery in a semi-used, semi-derelict packaging plant at Jish, otherwise known as Gush Halav. It is a Christian Arab village. Why there? Simply to be close to the vineyard. There is no sign indicating that there is a winery. No visitors' center, no marketing department or tasting room. There is scarcely a comfortable chair to sit on. What is there is what is necessary to make wine, period. Nothing frivolous to

