



DO GOOD, DRINK WELL



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

I traveled north from the center of the country. One especially enjoys going against the flow of the traffic. It took two hours to arrive at Kibbutz Yiron.

There, I was welcomed in the community garden of the kibbutz in a beautifully shaded, tranquil spot. It has a carefully cultivated wild look, resplendent with colorful flowers, a vegetable garden and fruit trees. All I needed was a book and a hammock.

Of course, I am not turning into a market gardener. I was there to visit Galil Mountain Winery. The interesting thing is that the winery planned that I should have a pit stop for breakfast made with local ingredients; also the perfect local wine, the winery's Aviv Rosé 2021, which was pink, fruity and refreshing. This calibrated my mind to nature and the environment, and set me up for what was to come.

We then moved to the winery. It backs up to the Lebanese border and is overlooked by Hezbollah outposts.

I arrived at the winery building and sought a glass of water. Thankfully, there was a water dispenser, but there were no plastic cups to be found anywhere. Then I saw some metal beakers to be used instead. As I looked up, I saw a rustic wooden sign on the wall giving the message: "RE-DUCE, RE-USE and RE-CYCLE."

I went into the winery shop, and the first thing I saw was a stall selling vegetables... in a wine shop! I could have been in the Carmel market. I browsed the shelves of wine and saw local bugs, flowers and fauna singing from the labels in quite a gaudy but colorful way. There was a message here. I got the point. Galil Mountain Winery likes nature and cares for the environment.

Then I went out on the balcony, where tourists were enjoying farm-to-table produce and wines, looking over the dreamy view of agricultural fields, woods and the imposing Mount Meron. The closeness to nature is



certainly different from most wineries, which sit forlorn in industrial estates.

Now, I have known Galil Mountain since just before the very beginning. It was founded in 2000 as a joint venture between the Golan Heights Winery and Kibbutz Yiron. The former was, and is, the king of the Golan Heights, and the idea was that Galil Mountain would represent the Galilee terroir. Yours truly, then with the Golan Heights Winery, was the first export manager of the new winery. Over the years, Galil Mountain became well established and carved a place in the Israeli wine scene.

Fast-forward another decade. By then, Anat Levy was CEO of the Golan Heights Winery and Galil Mountain, and Micha Vaadia was the winemaker. They both instinctively, coming from different places, had the feeling that introducing sustainable practices to Galil Mountain would be good for the future of the vineyards, good for the quality of the wine and good for the soul. The winery began to change how it managed its vineyards and cared for the environment. This is where it all began... and make no mistake – they were among the first in Israel to think this way.

The next time my attention was drawn to the winery was the announcement that it was recycling Nespresso

MICHA VAADIA is the experienced winemaker of Galil Mountain Winery. (Photos: Galil Mountain Winery)

ITS VINEYARDS are all in the eastern Upper Galilee, not far from the winery.

GALIL MOUNTAIN Winery is a leader in sustainability and regenerative farming.

capsules to make compost. I thought it was a "one announcement" gimmick, which would not outlive the first press release. I did not bother to write about it.

By now, Keshet Michaeli was the winery general manager. She has worked for the winery for a long time and knows it from each and every angle. She has been in purchasing, operations, finance, training and hospitality. Let's put it this way, she knows what is going on. She is impressive, knowledgeable, but modest and low-key. She is not an "it's all about me" manager.

She signed off on the sustainability concept and took it from the vineyard into the winery and offices. They then took the idea into the local community and even into restaurants in Tel Aviv. The key to her success was that everyone understood the benefits and felt part of the movement, not just the managers but the employees, too.

She also chose wisely. For example, the irreplaceable Dana Sharon, the marketing manager, is dynamic and bubbling with ideas. She talks so fast that her words roll over each other. She explained to me the trioka of objectives, which are wine, social issues and the environment, each with equal weight. That is the essence of the winery.

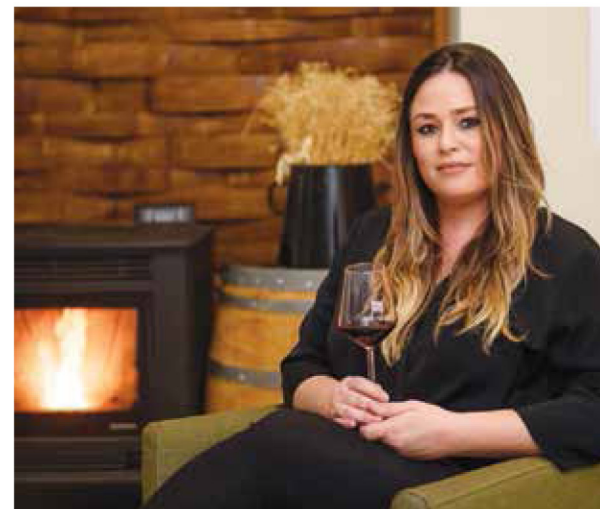
The winery has a culture of caring. It assists centers for damaged wildlife, supports women's organizations for victims of abuse and also helps people with disabilities. Regarding the environment, it is mapping the biological diversity of native plants and animals in and around the vineyards.



(FROM L) Yiron Red, Or Grenache, Aviv Rosé, Yiftach Vineyard, Galil Syrah.

KESHET MICHAELI, Galil general manager.

THE VISITORS' center offers farm-to-table produce.



However, it is in caring for the vineyard that the sustainability program really steps up. The winery shows respect for environmental diversity and natural cycles, reduces synthetic chemical use and lowers the impact of mechanization. It uses natural compost instead of synthetic fertilizers.

The most notable visual change can be seen between the vines. What was once brown dirt and sparse is now colorful with wild flowers, particularly in the spring.

The pilot with Nespresso was far from a one-night wonder. It was tested in 2017, and now, nearly six years later, is not only still being used, but the concept has been expanded.

The professionals behind this are the head winemaker, Vaadia, and his assistant Michael Avery. Vaadia is sensitive, artistic and idealistic, and a very accomplished winemaker. He graduated to Galil Mountain after a number of years at the Golan Heights Winery. Avery is a no-nonsense Aussie, also a graduate of the Golan Heights Winery. They complement each other very well and make a very accomplished team. They are making good wines at every price point and encouraging the move to regenerative agriculture with the support of the growers.

Most importantly, this is a winery with a sense of place. Galil Mountain is a large winery by any criteria. Any winery producing over a million bottles a year is large. Yet there are three other similarly large wineries in the Galilee, and they all buy fruit outside the Galilee. Galil Mountain is totally devoted not only to the Galilee but also to the Upper Galilee; and not only to the Upper Galilee but specifically to the eastern Upper Galilee. In fact, its seven vineyards are not so far from the winery. Therefore, this is a winery that represents a subregion. The wines are an expression of a specific place on our planet.

By the way, this focus on place by Galil Mountain is unique among our top 12 largest wineries, apart from the Golan Heights Winery, of course.

DESPITE THE excellent decision to promote sustainability, the winery had lost its way somewhat. The trade regarded Galil Mountain as a fourth or fifth label of the Golan Heights Winery and, to the market, the winery lacked identity. Names of wines were confusing, and the hierarchy of the labels was not clear. Those were not good years for image, though paradoxically the wines were still good.

In the last few years, the new team has put that right. The labels have been redesigned to reflect the care for the environment. Whether you like them or not, you get the message. The winery has also rationalized the selection, so the offer is sharper and easier to understand.

The entry-level label of the winery is Bar, which means wild nature in Hebrew. These are everyday, unoaked, easy drinking wines.

The Aviv wines, which are young, fresh and fruity, are reserved for on-premise (restaurants, etc.). Aviv means spring, and the labels illustrate the wild flowers that grow in and around the Upper Galilee vineyards.

Then, there is the Galil label. These are varietals and blends made in a fruit forward, vibrant and refreshing

style. The Hebrew word "Galil," Galilee, is also in the name of the winery. It emphasizes the connection of the winery with the region. I tasted the Galil Syrah 2019. It has great fruit, mouth-filling flavor and also refreshes.

A new label has been created called Or ("light" as in "sunlight"). This is home for more exotic, interesting, unusual wines. There is a Blanc de Noirs, a Barbera and a crunchy fruit, vibrant Grenache. This is the winemaker's playground, of interest to the wine geek.

The leading wine throughout all the years of the winery has been the flagship wine, Yiron Red. It immediately gained kudos in the court of wine critics, wine lovers and connoisseurs. The wine was always elegant, high quality, with layers of complexity. It was age-worthy and great value. However, it was also consistent and won prizes the world over. In Israel, it has become an institution. It was made from Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties. It is still up there and now has a little Syrah in the blend, too.

Obviously, the Yiron Red represents the best plots of the finest vineyards.

Now the winery has transformed its flagship wine into a flagship series, launching a range of five wines under the Yiron label. These represent the ultimate expression of the eastern Upper Galilee.

I tasted first the Yiron Rosé 2021. It was a delicate pink, with floral and citrus notes. It was lean with a piercing acidity. Next was the Yiron Sauvignon Blanc 2021. It was aromatic with overflowing baskets of tropical fruit, and was rich, slightly fat and broad in the mouth, with a refreshing finish. Yiron White 2021 followed. This is a Chardonnay, slightly creamy, but more restrained than what I call a "peaches and cream" Chardonnay. It had a beguiling texture, which

leads through the flavorful finish, but the good acidity keeps it honest. Yiron Syrah 2019 was fruit forward, peppery, even meaty, and quite tannic. I liked most the Sauvignon Blanc and the Yiron Red, which is peerless.

The Yiron wines are expressions of the Upper Galilee region, but the winery also makes single vineyard wines, depending on the quality of a particular vintage. The current wines are named after the vineyard: Sela, Hatzuk and Yiftah, respectively a Syrah, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, and they represent a specific place. The focus is on uniqueness, individuality and site-specific expression. My favorite was the Single Vineyard Yiftah 2019. How often do you see a single vineyard Petit Verdot here? It is a variety usually used in blends.

Galil Mountain is a winery that makes some very fine wines, like many of its competitors. However, it is the way the winery does it that is impressive – the idea of caring for the environment, supporting social issues and making wine with a sense of place, spreading from the vineyard outward to all activities of the winery like a tidal wave. It sets a great example for all other wineries in Israel.

I can only repeat the winery's slogan: "Do good, drink well." Amen to that. ■

The writer is a wine industry insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years. He is often referred to as the English voice of Israeli wines. www.adammontefiore.com

