

THE VISITORS' Center of the Golan Heights Winery in Katzrin. (Kfir Haravi)



(BELOW) YARDEN ROM 2019, recently launched. A wine for connoisseurs, collectors and private cellars. (Haggit Goren)

YARDEN CABERNET Sauvignon is Israel's leading award-winning ambassador for over 40 years. (Golan Heights Winery)

LEADING FROM THE FRONT



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The Golan Heights Winery is now entering its 40th year. Throughout its existence, the winery has led the wine revolution in Israel in terms of quality, marketing and education.

As a result of the investment in quality and image over 40 years, it is fair to say that the winery is today the No. 1 Israeli wine ambassador in the wide world of wine and the No. 1 exporter. Yarden is the most visible and famous wine brand, and Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon is Israel's most awarded wine.

In those 40 years, the winery has had only six managing directors and six winemakers, and the present head winemaker, Victor Schoenfeld, has been there for the past 30 years. By comparison, Carmel had five CEOs in six years in the past decade.

The sixth and current CEO of the Golan Heights Winery was appointed in 2022. The new person in the hot seat is Assaf Ben Dov. He is married, has three children and lives in Binyamina, a wine town named after Baron Edmond Benjamin de Rothschild, who founded the modern Israeli wine industry.

Ben Dov is an inspired choice. He has a great deal of experience in marketing, sales and management in the consumer world, including specializing in luxury products. He has loads of senior management experience, and in the past

20 years he was CEO of L'Oréal Luxury Products Division, Hamashbir Litzarchan and Maccabi Haifa Football Club.

His new role encompasses being CEO of the Golan Heights Winery and of Galil Mountain Winery, and includes Yarden Inc. in New York and Heichal Hayayin, the joint distribution venture between the Golan Heights Winery and Shaked, in Tel Aviv.

It is an impressive career, but even more important for me is his instinctive love of wine. What most management figures new to wine have to learn, he already has in spades. This is someone who enjoys life and appreciates fine wine... and good food, for that matter. He also has experience at the sharp end as an ex-restaurateur (as

owner of Manuella in Zichron Ya'acov and Gaia in Binyamina); and as a hobby wine lover, he hosted a casual wine club to taste, learn and talk about wine.

This passion, allied to his business experience and knowledge of the quality, deluxe sector, make him an ideal choice to take the winery into its fifth decade.

There are quite a few notable examples of CEOs who came from dairies, large food conglomerates or coffee concerns, who thought they would teach the wine world a thing or two. They entered with arrogance and unshakable complacency and didn't bother to get inside the skin of the wine trade. They did not do the work

because they thought they knew it all. None of them lasted long.

Ben Dov is far more prepared than that, and has done his homework. He gathers information systematically, is well briefed, and when you speak with him, you get the feeling he has researched thoroughly.

He is charismatic, has a mischievous sparkle in his eyes, and exudes passion and enthusiasm for the winery. When he speaks, the words flow like a waterfall. He is clear in his own vision and passionate about the winery he leads.

Most critically, Ben Dov believes we should not always just talk about the Golan Heights Winery of the past. We tend to do that when remembering the pioneering story of the 1980s and 1990s. Instead, we should relay the story of what the winery is doing in viticulture today. In short, it is really amazing. The winery is reinventing viticulture in Israel with innovation, technology and pioneering.

We Israelis should be proud of one of the very few wineries in the world that take control of the quality of their wine from the conception to the celebration. You can count on one hand the number of wineries that have created their own propagation block and nursery. The Golan Heights Winery therefore takes total responsibility for quality, from the clone and seedling to the wine in the glass.

Its Project 2020 to banish the leafroll virus was a great success and continues,





(L) ASSAF BEN DOV is the new CEO, taking the Golan Heights Winery into its 40th year. (Shai Ashkenazi)

VICTOR SCHOENFELD, legendary head winemaker of the Golan Heights Winery since 1992. (Shai Ashkenazi)

(BELOW) THE VINEYARDS in the northern Golan, in the shadow of snow-covered Mount Hermon, rise up to an elevation of 1,200 meters. (Golan Heights Winery)

providing a lesson to the other Israeli wineries and the authorities.

Many wineries have started to talk sustainability, and some are quite noisy. However, none have entered a sustainability program with the depth and professionalism of the Golan Heights Winery. It has done so quietly, modestly, but with total commitment, and is certified by LODI RULES, a respected and rigorous sustainability protocol from California.

When I complimented the winery on its sustainability program but complained that no one knew about it, Ben Dov told me that sustainability is not just an end in itself but part of the idea to grow better quality wine. It was a good answer.

The Golan Heights Winery is as up to date as tomorrow, and every decision is made with a long-term quality interest in mind. Certainly, it has a database of information that any winery in the world would be happy to have access to.

The Golan Heights are the most observed and studied agricultural land in Israel. In the winery's view, "The more we know and understand, the less we have to do in the vineyards."

Probably the most startling fact that gives an insight into the perfectionist mindset of the winery is that its vineyards are divided into a mosaic of 450 blocks, or plots. The size of the block is determined by the terroir. They are divided by differences that the winery considers significant, and astonishingly each block is managed independently.

The winery then makes no less than 450 boutique, or *garagiste*, wines before the formal and rigorous tastings to decide the final destiny of the fruit in terms of label, varietal or blend.

The attention to detail and pursuit of excellence are to make the most of the natural qualities of Golan. The volcanic tuff soil, combined with the high elevation (up to 1,200 meters elevation) and Mediterranean climate, makes the Golan Heights such a unique wine-growing region.

Ben Dov believes he is in a supporting role. "I am not the issue. It is not about me," he told me. He sees his job as enabling the winemaking team members

to work their magic. In his words, they are the fighters. His job is to give them the time, space and tools to continue their pursuit of quality at every price point. He is prepared to continue the winery's outsize investment in quality; and as demand outstrips availability, the winery is also in the midst of a program of planting.

Ben Dov gives a great deal of respect to the CEOs who have gone before. He is proud his winery is associated with one growing region, making wine with identity and authenticity. It does not buy wine from outside its own vineyards.

He thinks export is very important to the winery as a quality international brand, which is the prime representative of Israeli wine overseas.

Personally, he loves Californian wine, prefers Bordeaux to Burgundy and Brunello to Barolo. He talks about wine with passion. "I have to be excited by wine," he said. For him, a good wine is not just a dry tasting note but an emotional experience.

HE RECENTLY hosted the launch of Yarden Rom 2019 at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Guests arrived to the

beautiful sound of a harpist and sipped the Yarden Rose Brut 2016 as an aperitif. A brief tour of the museum was arranged, at which a guide chose three very different paintings to illustrate some joint features in the world of art and wine. It was a clever idea.

The Yarden Rom symbolizes many of the winery's qualities. This includes not being afraid to seek advice from the world's finest experts; working to make wine by plot and block instead of by vineyard or region; and stopping at nothing to make the highest quality possible.

The winery's winemaking consultant from 2002 to 2016 was Zelma Long, one of the true greats of Californian wine. She and Schoenfeld had a project to advance the quality in specific blocks. The result of this cooperation was the first Yarden Rom from the 2006 vintage, launched in 2010.

Only six vintages of Yarden Rom have been produced since then. The last was from the 2014 vintage. Until now, that is.

At the tutored tasting, Schoenfeld explained about the creation of the Rom concept. He referred to Long with affection as a mentor.

The first wine tasted was the Yarden Rom 2014, a blend of 48% Cabernet Sauvignon, 38% Syrah and 14% Merlot. It still showed youthful, with ripe fruit aromas and a hint of smokiness on the palate.

Then he showed the three varietals that are components of the blend, via three Yarden wines from the 2019 vintage. The wines tasted were Yarden Merlot 2019; Yarden Syrah 2019; and Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 2019. These three wines showed high quality, excellent drinkability; and in terms of high-quality wines in Israel today, they represent great value.

After this introduction, the Yarden Rom 2019 was poured. It is a blend of 52% Cabernet Sauvignon, 24% Syrah and 24% Merlot. Only 38 barrels were produced (approximately 11,400 bottles).

The wine was rich, opulent and spicy, with deep fruit aromas, warmth of the Israeli sun, and a backdrop of earthy, meaty flavors. It finished with a focused elegance and showed long, well-balanced, lingering length. Though drinking well now, it was obviously a baby worthy of long cellaring. It will be sought after by collectors.

If Ben Dov has a problem, it is conveying the excellence of what is happening at home to the Tel Aviv wine intelligentsia. The job of a CEO is not only repeating the drumbeat of quality appreciation of the home crowd but also having the insight of how the winery is seen by people outside the winery, away from home. Filling the gap between basking in one's own excellence within the gates of the winery and the realities of the marketplace and truly understanding how the winery is perceived outside is always the biggest task.

Assaf Ben Dov is exactly the right person to do this. After meeting him, I had the feeling that the Golan Heights Winery is in very good hands. ■

The writer is a winery insider turned wine writer. He has advanced Israeli wine for 35 years and is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. He is the wine writer for The Jerusalem Post. www.adammontefiore.com

