



THE BEAUTIFUL vineyards and surrounding countryside of the Judean Hills at Kibbutz Tzuba. (Photos: Judea Wine Club)

# WINE and GOURMET PARADISE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The official wine region of Judea lies between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, those contrasting cities that define modern Israel – framed as it is by the sea in the west and the mountains in the east. The Mediterranean Sea and the Jerusalem Mountains are the main features that contribute to such a unique terroir. This region is also synonymous with winemaking in the Bible, and ancient Judea was regarded with the same reverence as today's French region of Bordeaux – both in terms of quality and quantity.

The association between Judea and wine began a long time ago with the patriarch Jacob's blessing of his son Judah. This earmarked Judea as a region bountiful with wine. As Amos the Prophet wrote so poetically: "The mountains shall drip sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it."

Today, curious wine tourists may meander through the Judea region and chance upon ancient terraces where vineyards once grew. They will likely stumble on a flat limestone basin, where the grapes were once trodden by families and wine was made. This relic of ancient winemaking is a moving sight.

Sir Moses Montefiore, one of the most famous visitors to the Holy Land in the 19th century, wrote about Judea: "Everything is planted with vines and olive trees... It is impossible to imagine a richer and more beautiful land." However, when Baron Edmond de Rothschild sponsored the planting of vineyards to found a modern wine industry, his focus was more on the coastal plain.

It was not until the mid-1950s and 1960s that new vineyards were planted in the Judea region, but these were high yield vineyards for volume, supplying inexpensive wines to the country's large co-operative.

The Judea Region, which boasts some 40 wineries, is divided into two sub-regions.

The rolling hills that lead from the coastal plain form the Judean Foothills, where there are no lack of

vineyards and wineries. It is one of the most planted wine regions in Israel.

After Beit Shemesh and Route 38, elevations then sharply rise on the way to Jerusalem. This sub-region is known as the Judean Hills. In the mid to late 1980s, two enterprising pioneers, Eli Ben-Zaken and Ronnie James, first focused on the Judean Hills vineyards. The founding of Domaine du Castel in 1992 and Tzora Vineyards in 1993 were the turning points. By the 2000s it was understood that the Judean Hills was an outstanding appellation for high-quality wine, with white wines of good natural acidity and minerality – and fresh, elegant reds.

Vineyards are generally small, nestling either on a slope or in a small valley, often surrounded by a nature reserve, woods, or a forest. Around the vineyards are clumps of *garrigue*, a Mediterranean scrub, and wild Mediterranean herbs such as oregano, sage, and za'atar. There are also beautiful wildflowers, particularly in spring.

The constant winds from the Mediterranean are channeled through the valleys until they reach the Judean Hills. These are backed by the Jerusalem Mountains, and cool air circulates to the wadis of the Judean Hills, providing cold spells and a big difference between day and night-time temperatures.

The Judea Wine Region is responsible for a few firsts in Israeli wine. It was the first region to promote wine tourism – with the support, encouragement, and leadership of the Matte Yehuda Council, which organized its first regional event in 1998. By 2001, a Judea Wineries Club was formed.

These days the council promotes local festivals, professional seminars, and other activities to advance the wines of the region. More recently, the Judea Wine Region became the first in Israel to receive formal recognition as an "appellation of origin." This is the first such recognition in Israel since the Jaffa orange became a protected brand.

Wine producers will now be able to label their wines, "Judea," "Judean Foothills," and "Judean Hills," if at least 85% of the grapes in the wine come from these

protected areas. Certification stamps will be added to the wine labels.

Throughout Judea there are wineries to visit, where wine can be both tasted and acquired. Take in a winery, or three, on your way to or from Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Two of the four largest wineries in Israel: Barkan and Teperberg, are housed in Judea. The oldest is Domaine de Latrun, belonging to the 19th-century monastery.

Many of the wineries are small idiosyncratic individualists. Kerem Barak Winery produces mainly *pet-nats* ("petillant naturel," the ancestral method of making sparkling wines) and Sphera only produces white wines. Kadma Winery ferments its wine in *qvevri* ("large amphora") as they do in Georgia. Bravdo is a genuine estate winery, with the vineyard encircling the winery. There is even Mony Winery – situated at a monastery and owned by an Arab Israeli family – that produces kosher wines and excellent olive oil.

In 2017, the Judean Hills Quartet was founded, combining four of the very best wineries – the internationally recognized Castel, Flam, Sphera, and Tzora – which have succeeded in bringing a great deal of worldwide attention to the Judean Hills. In his *Pocket Wine Book* Hugh Johnson (one of the world's best-selling wine writers) ranks four Judean Hills wineries among the top five in Israel – and out of the top 12, he insists that six are from Judea.

In the Jerusalem corridor of the Judean Hills there are places to hike and picnic as well as villages such as Shores, Neve Ilan, Kiryat Anavim, Ma'ale Ha'hamisha, and Beit Zeit, all peppered with vineyards.

For those seeking good hummus and quality Arabic cuisine, Abu Gosh is a haven. Although tourists are most likely to use Tel Aviv or Jerusalem as their base, there is also accommodation available within the region. For instance, there is a hotel on the kibbutz where Tzuba Winery is located. You can be a wine tourist by day and enjoy the nightlife and culinary scene of Tel Aviv by night.

Alternatively, you might begin your day touring Jerusalem's religious sites or museums, followed



Clockwise from top L:

THE ANNUAL Judea wine festival took place this year as usual, and it was packed with wine lovers, connoisseurs, and enthusiasts.

THE A TEAM making Judea by far Israel's most active wine region in advancing wine tourism: (L to R) Hanny Ben Yehuda, Barak Katz, Roni Iron, and Rachel Harel.

JUDEA, THE first wine region to exhibit at the annual Sommelier Wine Trade Exhibition, proudly displaying their new 'appellation of origin.'

THE WINERIES of Judea get together for a group photo to celebrate 25 years of working together to market the region.



by a visit to a winery. There are enough wineries of different sizes and styles to fill a week of wine tourism. However, not everyone wants to go through a full day of just visiting wineries. The Judea Region also offers opportunities to access gourmet tours.

There are micro-breweries and craft distilleries, artisan goat cheese producers, olive-oil presses, tahini producers, organic farms – and even a chocolatier.

To illustrate the sheer variety of options, the Matte Yehuda tourism maestro, Barak Katz, invited me on a gourmet tour. He is a pearl. Dynamic and knowledgeable, he has vision, and the quality of his work shows in everything Judea does to develop wine tourism.

Katz's example should be followed by every other wine region in Israel. We met at the aforementioned Kerem Barak Winery and opened the morning with a tasting of five pet-nats. In fact, we sampled white, orange, rose, and red examples of the genre. I call these "hipster champagnes" or "beer drinker's sparkling wines." They are fun, irreverent, and out of the box.

It was a great start to the day. We then went to the Iza Pziza Goat Farm and Dairy at Tal Shahar. The goats had plenty of space and looked relaxed and happy. By contrast, at the visitors' center, the display cabinet was packed to the brim with cheeses of different types, and fridges filled with goat's milk and yogurts – impressive and tasty, especially with a glass of wine.

Next to Srigim-Li On and Agrocafe. This is an amazing start-up which is a joint venture by coffee growers in Colombia combined with Israeli chutzpa, technology, drive, and innovation. What I visited was a shop that sold coffee combined with a café and a place for learning, tasting, and talking coffee, especially as part of their workshops. The aroma of roasting beans is the finishing touch to the perfect coffee ambiance. It is a world that is very similar to that of wine.

Around the corner, we enjoyed a refreshing beer at Srigim Brewery and Beer Garden as we overlooked the Ela Valley, where David fought Goliath. It is remarkable in a modern, technologically advanced country, to stumble across the places and names from the Bible.

I loved the IPA, but the Pomegranate Beer was the most unique. Almost as an afterthought, I was shown their still and given a dram of their Drunken Owl Whisky! It was very good, though still young. Then we drove to Tzur Hadassah, where I was led through a leafy back entrance, to meet the Tavlin Distillers. We sat in the garden with our charming, hospitable, and chatty hosts. Their product was artisan – to say the least. I asked to buy a bottle, and they had to rush home to fill it.

Srigim Brewery sells some of its gin bottles closed with rudimentary corks (reminiscent of opened and re-corked wine bottles), while others are properly sealed off with wax. Both are the same price, apparently. The hand-painted pottery bottles from Hebron are beautiful and original though, and their London Dry

and Floral Gins are attractively aromatic. (If you are purchasing, make sure you get the finished rather than the unfinished version of the bottle.) If you want to be pleasantly surprised, ask for their beetroot eau de vie.

We finished up at the Soreq Winery with a chilled rose – a type of wine beginning to be associated with Israel. Soreq is a winery, a winemaking school, and a custom crush facility. Many of Israel's future wine-makers cut their teeth there.

So in a single, short day, packed with content, we tasted wine, cheese, coffee, beer, whisky, and gin – each created by a pioneer with passion and individuality. Part of the fun of the tourist is to extract the uniqueness from each particular story. And then there is the culinary side which you can add to the mix.

The wine region of Judea is an agricultural paradise made up of beautiful countryside and enterprising agriculture, with a variety of local and ethnic cuisines, using locally grown produce. Above all, the region is awash with vineyards, wineries, and wines.

This is the very heart of Israel and the center of Israel's wine growing. For the wine tourist, Judea is the essence of modern Israel, a reminder of ancient Israel, and the source of some of our finest and most interesting wineries. A mere hop, skip and a jump away from Ben-Gurion Airport, and a short ride from both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, lies a wine and gourmet region that just demands exploration. ■

*The writer is a wine industry insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. [adammontefiore.com](http://adammontefiore.com)*

