

A HISTORY OF ISRAELI WINE

FROM THE ISRAELITES TO THE ISRAELIS

Ancient Israel – Pre State Israel – Modern Israel – Israel Today

Israel is now considered a quality wine producing country. This may be seen by the constantly improving quality and international recognition at the highest possible level for its wines. It seems that each year, Israeli wines are pushing the boundaries with their achievements.

To quote Hugh Johnson, the world's most famous wine writer: *"Recently with plantings of classic varieties in cool high-altitude regions, a wine revolution took root. Continued investment in modern technology, and international trained winemakers have had dramatic effect."* Robert Parker, then the world's most influential wine critic, wrote about Israeli wines: *"The wines are getting better all the time and some of them are superb."* Jancis Robinson MW, today's leading wine critic and wine writer, wrote: *"Improvements in quality and consistency.....have been remarkable."* Mark Squires in the Wine Advocate said: *"Israel has developed a wine industry that will confound preconceptions."* Oz Clarke saw it another way: *"Israel is a rising star of the wine world."* When the prophet Amos predicted: *"The mountains shall drip with wine and all the hills will flow with it. ...they shall plant vineyards and drink their wines."* How right he was!

Israel now has a thriving and dynamic wine industry. Vineyards again cover the map of Israel. The wines are better than ever. Even though this all seems so recent, it is a fact that the land of Israel had been making wine for over 5,000 years. The importance of wine in Biblical times and at the birth of the Jewish people, connects as if by a thread, to the status of wine in the Israel of today. Wine is the best expression there is of the People and Place, and perfectly illustrates the agriculture, technology and innovation of the Start-Up Nation. The importance of wine in this sliver of land in the Eastern Mediterranean caused it to be enshrined in Judeo-Christian religious ritual and it has become an integral part of Western Culture. This long illustrious history of winemaking is now matched by the quality of the wines. Israel is now considered a quality wine producing country. This may be seen by the constantly improving quality and international recognition at the highest possible level for its wines. It seems that each year, Israeli wines are pushing the boundaries with their achievements.



ANCIENT ISRAEL

The grapevine was first domesticated simultaneously in both the Levant and the Caucasus 11,000 years ago. However, it was from the Levant (Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) that the vines made their way westwards, cross breeding with wild vines in Europe, to give the *Vitis Vinifera* vines of today. The Eastern Mediterranean was the cradle of the world's wine culture, and Canaan must have been one of the earliest countries to enjoy wine, well over 2,000 years before the vine reached Europe.

NOAH – THE FIRST WINEMAKER

The art of winemaking is thought to have begun in the area between the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Galilee. The biblical Noah was the first recorded vigneron, who, after the flood, "*became a husbandman and planted a vineyard.*" As the Book of Genesis relates, he was also the first person to suffer from drinking too much!

The vine then traveled south, through Phoenicia and Canaan to Egypt. The Phoenicians were the great traders of wine. The Canaanites were the world's best winemakers. Arguably, Egypt was the world's first great wine culture, where wine was exalted and treasured. The Egyptians particularly prized the wines of Canaan. In about 1800 B.C.E. there was a communication which reported that Canaan was "*blessed with figs and with vineyards producing wine in greater quantity than water.*"

MOSES: A LAND OF MILK, HONEY AND WINE

Jacob's blessing of his son Judah, in the Book of Genesis, implied a rosy wine future for Judea. Later in Genesis, Joseph came across Pharaoh's Cupbearer, an early insight to the high profile of wine. In the Book of Numbers, the story is told of how Moses sent spies to check out the Promised Land. They returned with a grape cluster so large, that it had to be suspended from a pole and carried by two men, Joshua and Caleb. They said: "*It is a land flowing with milk and honey, and **this** is the fruit.*" Today, both Carmel Winery and the Israel Ministry of Tourism use this enduring image as their logo. The vine was one of the blessings promised to the children of Israel. The Israelites soon inherited and adopted the wine expertise and culture of the Canaanites. The grape was one of the seven blessed species.

In recent years excavations have uncovered ancient presses and storage vessels that indicate a well-developed and successful wine industry existed in the area. Grape clusters and vines were frequent motifs on coins and jars found from ancient times. Coins have been found commemorating the victories of the Hasmoneans and Bar Kochba, with grapes featured as a symbol of the fertility of the country. Many wine presses and storage cisterns have been found from Mount Hermon to the Negev. The discovery of a wine cellar at Tel Kabri in the Galilee dated



back more than 3,600 years, excited archeologists from all over the world. It was the largest Canaanite wine cellar ever discovered.

Inscriptions and seals of wine jars illustrate that wine was a commercial commodity being shipped in goatskin or pottery. The vineyards of Galilee and Judea were mentioned. The earliest storage vessels originated in southern Canaan and were known as Canaanite Jars. Today they are better known by their Greek name, *'amphorae.'*

KING DAVID: THE FIRST SOMMELIER

The Kings of Judah were said to have owned vast vineyards and stores for wine. King David's wine holdings were so substantial that his court included two special officials to manage them. One was in charge of the vineyards and the other in charge of the cellars. These may have been Israel's first viticulturist and first sommelier!

At this time the Jewish devotion to wine was clearly shown in their developing literature, lifestyle and religious ritual. Indeed, anyone planting a new vineyard was exempt from military service, even in national emergency. The Book of Isaiah gives very clear instructions of how to plant and care for a vineyard, even to the point of suggesting the wine press be close to the vineyard. Micha's vision of peace on earth and harmony among men was illustrated with, "*and every man will sit under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make him afraid.*" It was Nehemiah, cupbearer (sommelier), to the King of Persia, who helped to revive winemaking after the Babylonian exile.

Vines were grown on terraces on the hills, or allowed to sprawl over pools of earth between the rocky ground and trees in the valleys. Wine presses were situated next to the vineyards. When the wine was made, it was stored in amphorae in cool caves. Much of the wine was made for drinking. Consumption was far greater than today as water was not considered safe because it carried diseases.

Wine was produced not just for drinking but was also important for medical purposes, for cleaning out homes and dyeing cloth. It was used as a currency for paying tribute and also for paying soldiers. There was a message uncovered on a pottery shard from a soldier in the garrison at Tel Arad, saying "*If there is wine, send quantity.*" It was dated 2,600 years ago. Next to archaeological site of Tel Arad, lies the modern day Yatir Winery. Wine was a mainstay of the economy and was also exported around the Mediterranean basin. Wines were named after the port they were exported from (Gaza, Askelon etc), by wine style (Yashan Noshan, Conditon etc) or an area (Sharon, Carmel etc.) They were not known by variety. They were usually sweetened (with date honey), flavored with herbs, or made savory with the addition of sea water. Archaeologists in the City of David, in the Old City of Jerusalem, found wine jars flavored with vanilla. This was apparently what the elite enjoyed in the Kingdom of Judea.



JESUS TURNING WATER INTO WINE

The miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana is in the New Testament. Interestingly, the wine was most likely white, because it looked like water. Cana is in the Galilee, today one of the quality wine regions of Israel. Winemaking in Ancient Israel was at its peak during the period of the Second Temple. When the Romans destroyed the Temple, Jews were dispersed. However, by this time the Nabataeans, in the Negev desert, and the Byzantines, everywhere else, continued the wine producing traditions in the country. The large wine complex discovered at Yavne, dating from 1,500 years ago, remains the largest Byzantine winery ever found. The wine presses discovered and preserved at Avdat and Shivta, illustrate the very developed wine industry that existed in the desert. In some breathtaking recent research, two grape pips discovered at Avdat were analyzed. They were dated to be from 900 B.C.E. One was Syriki, a red variety that still exists in Crete and Lebanon, and the other was Be'er, possibly the variety that made the famous Gazan sweet white wine. It is the oldest white wine variety ever to be identified. The desert wine industry was already in terminal decline due to plague, earthquake and climate change. However, by the time of the Arab conquest with the rise of Islam and their prohibition of alcohol, many of the remaining vineyards were uprooted. The once proud wine industry withered and then lay forsaken, though Jews and Christians continued to make wine domestically.

THE CRUSADES

The Crusaders briefly revived the cultivation of grapes in the Holy Land and vines were planted in places like Bethlehem and Nazareth. The revival was short lived, but the Crusaders did return to Europe with many noble grape varieties which had their origins in the Middle East.

On the founding of the Ottoman Empire, the Middle Eastern wine industry was finally obliterated because of the decline in wealth of the whole region and the wars and epidemics, which greatly reduced and weakened the populations. Communities which had supported the wine industry finally departed. Prices of wine rose, consumption fell. Hashish and coffee replaced wine as affordable intoxicants.



PRE-STATE ISRAEL

In the Israel of the mid nineteenth century, there was no wine industry as such, but wherever there are Jews, there will be home wine makers. Jews require wine for even their most basic religious ritual and there were quite a few home-based wineries owned by Jews. The raw materials were supplied by the Arab vineyards in the Bethlehem & Hebron areas. Zeitani, Hevroni and Dabouki were some of the grape varieties used.

MONTEFIORE ENCOURAGES AGRICULTURE

Sir Moses Montefiore, the most prominent visitor to Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) at this time, wanted to encourage Jews to return to agriculture and plant vines, so that they could become self-sufficient instead of surviving on charity and philanthropy. As early as 1839, he shared his vision. He noted how well wild vines and olive trees adapted to the shallow, stony soils of the hills and foothills, and the coarse sandy soils of the plains. In 1855, he made the first purchases of land to encourage agricultural settlement. These included the Montefiore Orchard, Israel's first ever orange groves near Jaffa, the beginning of Israel's citrus industry, and 'Kerem Moshe & Yehudit', which was to become the cornerstone of modern Jerusalem. (Later to be respectively renamed the Montefiore Quarter of Tel Aviv and Mishkenot Sha'ananim.) He insisted residents plant vines and olive trees to get a taste for agriculture. In 1857 he built the Montefiore Windmill to provide work on the premise "*If there is no flour, there is no Torah; if there is no Torah, there is no flour.*"

Montefiore drank a bottle of wine every day and lived to be 100 years old. His love of wine was well-known, and local communities would invariably proudly present him with their homemade wine as a gift. The wines, named after the place the grapes were grown, were most commonly referred to as 'Hebron wine.' Montefiore would buy a bottle of Holy Land wine as a souvenir, or even a small cask. There was no lack of domestic wineries to choose from.

SHOR & TEPERBERG FAMILIES: OLD CITY WINERIES

Even in the Old City of Jerusalem alone, there were no less than 26 wineries, but they were not commercial. They were tiny home-based wineries producing wine for family, friends and the local community. Most of the wine was sweet. Dry and semi dry wines were known as 'sour.' Wine was sold in small casks. Glass bottles were rare, and there were no labels or kosher certification. Two of the wineries, owned by the Shor and Teperberg families, are remembered, simply because their families have endured in the wine business until today.



The first recorded winery was Ginio Winery, opened in 1840 by David Ginio, who was from Salonika. The winery was situated at the beginning of Rehov Yehudim (Jews Street) in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. Zion Winery, Israel's oldest existing winery, was founded in 1848 by Rabbi Yitzhak Shor. His father, Rabbi Mordechai Avraham Shor, as head of the Yeshiva Tiferet Israel, had been introduced to Moses Montefiore and was influenced by him. They realized the family would have to earn a living. The Shor family winery was situated on Haggai Street, in the Moslem Quarter of the Old City, in an alley backing on to the Little Western Wall. Today, different branches of the Shor family still operate a number of wineries: 1848, Arza-Hayotzer, Hacormim and Zion. Arza and Hacormim were founded in the 1950's, but they are all operated by the Shor family, which have been in the wine business, handed down from father to son, for 175 years. Interestingly, the indigenous grapes they used in those days, were the same ones that were to become an object of new interest from 2008 onwards. Zion Winery is unique in that the owners, managers *and* winemakers have always been members of the Shor family since 1848 until today.

The Teperbergs were another company operating in the Old City. They picked up their Germanic sounding name and an interest in wine from Austria. Since 1852 they were retailers and distributors of wines & spirits, specializing in the Christian market. In 1870, Zeev Zeide Teperberg founded Efrat Winery. In the pre-state period, the winery went bankrupt. It was started up again after the founding of the State of Israel. This winery continues today under the family name Teperberg. It is the fourth largest winery in Israel and it is the largest family-owned winery. The current CEO is Motti Teperberg, from the fifth generation of the family. He has been CEO for nearly forty years. The Shors and the Teperbergs were symbols of the resettlement of Jerusalem, which resulted in there being a Jewish majority well before the founding of the state.

In 1870 the Mikveh-Israel Agricultural School was founded, southeast of Jaffa. The school, under French patronage and managed by Charles Netter from Alsace, emphasized the new importance of agriculture. Mikveh-Israel Wine Cellars, on the same site, were the first to use European varieties, like Carignan from the South of France. Many of the new wave of immigrants who "*returned to Zion*" towards the end of the nineteenth century, learned the rudiments of agriculture at the school, before planting vineyards in the places where they were to settle. The agricultural school still exists on the original site, near the town of Holon, but sadly the winery is no longer operational.

With the beginning of modern Jewish settlements in 1882, the urge to return to the land intensified. The new immigration wanted to escape the pogroms in Eastern Europe and to reclaim the land of their forefathers. They were idealists, unused to physical work, who went through unspeakable hardships.



ROTHSCHILD: FOUNDER OF A MODERN WINE INDUSTRY

The struggling new villages of Rishon Le Zion & Zichron Ya'acov, founded by new immigrants from Russia and Romania respectively, sought financial assistance from Baron Edmond de Rothschild. He was a banker and art collector, who lived in Paris, and he was also owner of Chateau Lafite in Bordeaux, one of the most famous wineries in the world. He not only offered support but commissioned a report to survey the agricultural possibilities in what was a barren land. One of his expert horticulturists, summoned from the Palace of Versailles to visit Palestine, recommended vineyards as being the solution in 1882. The first experimental vineyards were duly planted. Initially efforts were made to plant wheat and potatoes, but these did not succeed. However the vineyards thrived. So the farming villages formally decided to turn to grapes in 1884. They planted varieties like Alicante (Grenache), Carignan, Espart (Mourvedre), Bordolo (Cinsault), Brachet and Petit Bouschet.

Rothschild, who sponsored early Jewish pioneer settlements in the Land of Israel, had high hopes that viticulture would develop as the main economic basis for the Jewish villages. In 1887 he visited for the first time and fell in love with the Mount Carmel area, which he thought was Israel's Tuscany or Provence. He then decided to create a wine industry. Rothschild brought in the best agronomists from France, winemaking expertise from Bordeaux and the finest equipment money could buy to ensure his project was a success.

Being owner of the famous Bordeaux winery, Château Lafite, he was determined to make a great Bordeaux style wine. So, he sent cuttings of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Malbec, taken from Lafite's vineyard. When the scourge of phylloxera hit the vineyards, they circumvented the problem by bringing cuttings from a nursery in Kashmir. These became known as 'the Indian vines'.

When his experts encouraged caution, Rothschild admonished them saying that he did not want to make wine like was made in Algeria, Georgia or Bessarabia (Moldova). *"Yes, in Algeria it is all very well to make a great deal of poor wine. We, for our part, must make **good** wine."* Rothschild also thought Israeli wine would not have the capacity or economies of scale to compete 'down market.' In fact, even though Rothschild's view was visionary, his dream was not realized in his lifetime. The growers did not like the low yields of these varieties and there was no real market for a fine Palestine wine. When the Bordeaux varieties were affected by phylloxera, they had to be ripped out, and vineyards were replanted with varieties like Carignan, Alicante, Clairette & Ugni Blanc.

SCV DES GRANDES CAVES

In the meantime, Rothschild built large wineries at Rishon Le Zion in 1890 and at Zichron Ya'acov in 1892, and sent a Bordeaux winemaker to take charge. Charles Mortier, maître de chai of Chateau Lafite, was a consultant. The wineries were very large by world standards and extremely advanced for their time. The first time that electricity and the telephone were used in Israel was at the Rishon & Zichron Wineries.



Rothschild then built deep underground cellars at Rishon le Zion & Zichron Ya'acov in order to keep the wine at a steady temperature. The project was begun in 1893 and finished in 1896. The deep underground cellars, which were 50 meters long, were more successful in maintaining a steady temperature. The cellars at Rishon Le Zion cost the Baron 6 million francs and at Zichron Ya'acov the cost was 5 million francs. (By comparison, the purchase of Chateau Lafite only cost the Rothschilds 4 million francs, and Chateau Mouton had previously been purchased by the family for 1 million francs!)

In 1895 the Carmel Wine Co. was formed by E.Z. Lewin-Epstein, one of the founders of Rehovot, to market the wines of Rishon and Zichron overseas. The first export office was opened in Warsaw in 1896, followed by Austria (1897), Germany, Britain (1898) and America (1900). The company in Britain was known as "*Palestine Wine Co.*", hence the name 'Palwin', which became the first Israeli wine brand. Wines were labeled using numbers, to make it easy for new immigrants to identify the different wines. Palwin became the largest selling Israeli wine in Great Britain for well over 100 years.

The wineries of Rishon Le Zion and Zichron Ya'acov were proud examples of the Zionist enterprise. When Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, visited Israel in 1898, he made a point of visiting Rishon Cellars during his short stay in the country. Afterwards he said: "*There are big wineries in Hungary, but not like this. I saw modern wineries in France, but not like this. What a great thing the Baron had done!*" Herzl showed his appreciation by becoming a shareholder of Carmel Wine Co. in Austria. The first major award to be given to an Israeli wine was the Gold Medal presented to Carmel No.1 at the famous Paris Exhibition of 1900. Carmel shared the winner's podium with some of Bordeaux most famous Chateaux!

In 1902 the name 'Carmel Oriental' was first used to denote the company marketing wines in the Ottoman Empire to places like Beirut, Damascus, Constantinople, Alexandria as well as Jaffa & Jerusalem. Carmel even had a branch in Cairo. In 1906 the management of the wineries at Rishon le Zion and Zichron Ya'acov was deeded to the growers, who founded the "*Société Cooperative Vigeronne des Grandes Caves, Richon-le-Zion and Zichron Jacob Ltd.*" (*Agudat Hacormim* in Hebrew.) The registration of the name in French was in recognition of the Baron's contribution. The cooperative included vineyards in all the new farming villages funded by Rothschild, both Rishon Le Zion and Zichron Ya'acov Wine Cellars, and two marketing companies. Carmel Oriental was later translated to Hebrew, and the winery became known as Carmel Mizrahi. 'Carmel Wine Co.' was the company marketing wine in export markets.

BEN-GURION: WINERY WORKER

No less than three future prime ministers of Israel worked in Carmel's wineries & vineyards before they entered politics. David Ben-Gurion was an employee at Rishon le Zion in 1907. He worked during the harvest, but for him it was not a good memory. As a result of the smell of fermenting



grapes, he could not stand the taste of wine for many years afterwards. However, by the time he returned to the winery after having being Israel's first prime minister, he showed more goodwill to the place where he had worked so many years before.

Levi Eshkol – Israel's third prime minister of Israel, managed one of Rothschild's original vineyards surrounding the winery at Rishon in 1915. Sometime later, a third, Ehud Olmert, also worked at Rishon Le Zion Cellars in his youth.

The wine business expanded and sales increased particularly during the First World War, when German, British and Australian troops passed through the country. When the war was over though, the industry lost its principal markets: Russia, because of the Revolution; the United States because of Prohibition and Egypt and the Middle East because of Arab nationalism. Many vineyards were replaced with citrus groves, almonds and olive trees.

In 1934, Baron Edmond de Rothschild passed away. His remains were later reinterred in the beautiful Ramat Hanadiv Gardens, on the southern slopes of Mount Carmel, overlooking the sea and the winery & vineyards he loved so much. The family live on in the names of the places he founded. The town of Binyamina and village of Bat Shlomo were respectively named after him and his mother, and Zichron Ya'acov, was named after his father, Baron James Jacob de Rothschild, who had purchased Chateau Lafite for the Rothschild family.

MONASTERY WINERIES

Generally Israeli wineries were Jewish owned, but there were also some wineries run by monasteries. Latroun Monastery, founded in 1890 by Trappist Monks from France, managed Domaine de Latroun, sourced from their own vineyards. It is situated just off the Tel Aviv - Jerusalem Highway. They were the first to bring grapes such as Gewurztraminer and Pinot Noir to the Holy Land.

Cremisan Winery was founded by the Cremisan Monastery at Beit Jalla. It was founded by Salesian Monks from Italy in 1885. Cremisan is today the pioneer in the revival of indigenous Palestinian varieties such as Dabouki, Hamdali and Jandali. The Templars from Germany also greatly contributed their agricultural skills to the Holy Land's development. It was Templar engineers that built the wineries at Rishon Le Zion, Zichron Ya'acov and Mikveh Israel. They also had a winery in Sarona, adjacent to the current Montefiore Quarter of Tel Aviv, built in the mid 1870's, using grapes such as Sylvaner. The Teperberg & Segal families were partners in the establishment of a distillery there in the mid 1920's. The Templars returned to Germany at the onset of World War II. Local Palestinian Christians also always made wine domestically. These were from local table grapes, mainly Dabouki. The winemaker was usually the woman of the house. The wine purely for family use, was sweet. When it soured, it was distilled to make arak.



MODERN ISRAEL

During the Second World War, the industry began to grow again. By the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the vineyards only covered 1,720 ha, but there were fourteen wineries in existence. Eliaz and Askalon-Carmei Zion were founded in the early years of the state. Eliaz was established in 1952 by Joseph Seltzer, an immigrant from Hungary. The winery was named after his son Eliezer, who was killed in the War of Independence. David Ben-Gurion, by then prime minister, assisted the winery to receive the necessary permits. Askalon (sic) was founded by the Segal family of distillers from White Russia. They founded a winery in 1950 and later settled in Ramle.

JAMES ROTHSCHILD DONATION

James Rothschild, son of Baron Edmond, left France and went to live in England. There he became a Member of Parliament. He played a significant part with Chaim Weizman in bringing about the Balfour Declaration in favor of a Jewish National State. Always a fervent Zionist, he eventually he took over his father's interests in Palestine.

He was involved in the failed perfume factory, where Eliaz was to be situated and in the first Palestine Brewery at Rishon Le Zion, adjacent to the winery. In 1957 he arranged to donate the Rishon le Zion and Zichron Ya'acov Wine Cellars to SCV Carmel. Thus, the involvement and interest of the Rothschild family in the Israel wine industry extended from 1882 until 1957. This was the same Rothschild that donated the money to build Israel's parliament building – The Knesset. The foundation he set up, Yad Hanadiv, continues to this day to contribute Israel's beauty & splendor. David Ben Gurion wrote: *“Truly a great father was followed by a son no less great.”*

In 1957, the Israel Wine Institute was formed in cooperation with the industry and government. It was initially managed by an agronomist and oenologist from France. Initially, many wines were generically named, but in 1961 Israel was a signatory of the Madrid Pact and names such as Port and Sherry disappeared from the domestic market place. The main wineries at this time were Carmel Mizrahi, Eliaz, Friedman-Tnuva (forerunner of WEST-Stock), Askalon, Mikveh-Israel and the Shor family's 'Jerusalem' wineries. The main areas of vineyards were in the coastal valleys of the southern Mt. Carmel, and the central Judean Plain & Judean Foothills.

PROF. CORNELIUS OUGH: A RECOMMENDATION

By the 1960's, Carmel controlled over 90% of the vineyards in Israel. Most of the red wines were based on Carignan, and medium dry white wines were made from Semillon. Carmel Hock, Grenache Rose and Adom Atik, were the most popular table wines. In 1971 Israel's first varietal wines – a Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc - were released in the export market by Carmel.



In 1976 Carmel made a legendary Cabernet Sauvignon Special Reserve, which was Israel's first international style quality wine. Winemaker Freddie Stiller was not permitted to buy barrels for aging wine, so instead he used some of the limousin oak barrels intended for brandy. It was the first wine matured in small oak barrels and aged in bottle before release. It was to be the forerunner of the quality revolution.

In 1976, the first vineyards were planted on the Golan Heights. The idea was to give the communities another source of income and Carmel was going to buy the fruit.

Professor Cornelius Ough from the University of California at Davis, had visited Israel in the 1960's and 1970's on long working visits. He made recommendations to the Israel Wine Institute, the Ministry of Agriculture and the 'large cooperative' (meaning Carmel SCV.) He was disappointed that no-one took his advice. In 1982, he did however recommend founding a winery on the Golan Heights, planting classic varieties and hiring a winemaker from California.

PETER STERN INTRODUCES NEW WORLD TECHNOLOGY

By 1982 a group of four kibbutzes and four moshavs on the Golan had decided to plant vines. They formed a partnership and the result was the founding of the Golan Heights Winery in 1983. The canny general manager of the winery was Shimshon Welner. He sought expertise from overseas and was put in touch with Peter Stern from California. Stern was a wine consultant who had been winemaker of J.Lohr and had previously worked for famous wineries such as Mondavi and Gallo. He was approached because of his professional background and also his Jewish name. Even though it transpired he was not Jewish, he was to be the winemaking consultant for the next twenty years.

Peter Stern, along with a series of his protégé Californian trained winemakers, re-invented Israeli viticulture and brought New World winemaking techniques to Israel, using the cooler climate, high elevation vineyards of the Golan. This was the first time an Israeli winery took total charge of vineyard activities and decisions of what to plant, how to prune and when to harvest passed from the grower to the winery. Stern brought about a massive change in Israeli winemaking, and later did the same for Kosher wine in the United States as winemaker of Herzog Wine Cellars.

YARDEN PUTS ISRAEL ON THE INTERNATIONAL WINE MAP

When Yarden wines were exported to America by the Golan Heights Winery, they were referred to as Israel's first world class wines by famous wine critics like Frank J. Prial and Howard G. Goldberg. In 1987 at the International Wine & Spirit Competition in London, the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1984, won not only a Gold Medal, but also the Winiarski Trophy as the best red wine in the Competition. Then a year later, the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1985 won Gold Medals at both the Challenge International du Vin in Bordeaux and IWSC, again, and also a trophy at Vinexpo.



Yarden wines were awarded the prestigious "Grand Prix d'Honneur" at Vinexpo in Bordeaux three times in a row. Israeli wine had arrived! Since then the Golan Heights Winery have been the pioneers of the Israel wine. They continue to win awards in major wine tasting competitions.

YONATAN TISHBI: FIRST GROWER TO FOUND WINERY

Tishbi Winery was founded in 1985. Yonatan Tishbi, whose great grandparents planted vineyards for Rothschild in the 1880's, became the first vineyard owner to decide to build his own winery. He left the Wine Growers Cooperative (SCV). This was at the time a brave move with no certainty of success. Tishbi was the forerunner of the small winery boom that was to follow. The first winemaker of the winery was Dr. Yair Margalit and one season, a young winemaker from California called Victor Schoenfeld looked after the vineyards! In 1990 Barkan took over the Stock – WEST winery (previously known as Friedman Tnuva), which had gone bankrupt and steadily grew their share of the market.

MARGALIT AND BEN-ZAKEN: SMALL WINERY BOOM

The boutique winery revolution began in the 1990's. Kibbutz Tzora and Dalton followed Tishbi's example of adding a winery to established vineyards. Tzora was founded by grower and Kibbutz member, Ronnie James, and Dalton by the Haruni family, originally from England. Yair Margalit and Eli Ben Zaken were examples of domestic winemakers who decided to establish their own wineries, resulting in Margalit Winery and Domaine du Castel respectively.

Dr. Yair Margalit was a chemistry professor, who studied winemaking in California, opened his boutique winery in 1989. It was the first modern, quality boutique winery. Yair Margalit also acted as consultant to other fledgling wineries. Tony Aspler, Canada's leading wine writer, wrote that Margalit was making the best wine in Israel, which could be mistaken for Mouton Rothschild in a blind tasting.

Eli Ben Zaken, was a self-taught, domestic winemaker, who learnt winemaking from a book by Emile Peynaud. By a stroke of good fortune his first wine, the Castel Grand Vin 1992, got noticed by Serena Sutcliffe MW, head of the Sotheby's Wine Department. She wrote that it was the best wine Israeli wine she had ever tasted. Both Margalit and Castel showed that smaller wineries could also make world class wines. Many other small new wineries would be founded in the coming years. In 2003, Castel became kosher and won even more awards after, than before. This illustrated once and for all, that kashrut was not something that effected quality. The 1990's really saw the coming of age of the Israeli wine market. During these prosperous years, Israel went through a cultural revolution in terms of food & wine. The boutique winery boom continues today.



LARGE WINERIES REJUVENATED

The larger wineries reacted to the boutique winery boom at the beginning of the 2000's. The traditional, historic wineries of Israel: Carmel Mizrahi, Efrat, Eliaz and Askalon were renamed Carmel Winery, Teperberg, Binyamina and Segal Wines respectively, and they started a revolution of their own, deciding to re-brand, and focus on quality table wines. The large wineries also invested heavily. Carmel founded Yatir Winery in the Northeast Negev. They closed production at Rishon Le Zion and totally refurbished their Zichron Ya'acov facility. Later they built a new facility at Alon Tabor. The Golan Heights Winery opened a new winery called Galil Mountain, situated on the border with Lebanon. Barkan built a new advanced winery at Hulda and planted alongside it the largest vineyard in the country. They also bought Segal Wines. Teperberg built a new winery at Tzora. The traditional, so-called Jerusalem wineries, all created new wineries or new brands promoting table wines, instead of Kiddush wine and grape juice: 1848 Winery was founded by the 8th generation of the Shor family owning Zion Winery; Arza created a new brand called Hayotzer Winery, and Shimshon Winery became Jerusalem Vineyard Winery.

A new style of investor became attracted to the Israeli wine scene. These were idealists who built new wineries with no expense spared. They had a determination to make quality wines but also with great attention to aesthetics. Amphorae, Chateau Golan, Clos de Gat, Ella Valley and Flam were examples of new wineries built in beautiful settings.

Large commercial concerns entered the wine business. Tempo, the country's largest brewery, purchased Barkan, which has grown to become Israel's second largest winery. IBBL, a subsidiary of the Central Bottling Company, aka Coca Cola Israel, purchased Tabor Winery. The owner of the supermarket chain, Hezi Hinam, bought Binyamina Winery. A Recanati, from the famous industrialist & philanthropist family, invested in wine, by founding the Recanati Winery.

Carmel Winery was bought by Kedma Capital, a consortium of investors from Britain, France, the United States and Israel. Eventually the two largest wineries became part of public companies. Tempo Beverages was the first, and this was recently followed by Carmel Corp., the new owners of Carmel Winery.

Winemakers invariably studied abroad either in California, Australia, France or Italy. Also, wine consultants were used. Peter Stern, responsible for much of the quality revolution in Israel, worked with the Golan Heights Winery and then for Carmel. Flying winemaker, Australian John Worontschak assisted Dalton. Later the Californian icon Zelma Long advised the Golan Heights Winery, Michel Rolland, the world's most influential winemaking consultant, advised Amphorae, Riccardo Cotarella worked with Cremisan and Jean Claude Berrouet, winemaker of Petrus, one of the world's most iconic wines, still advises Tzora Vineyards.



THIRD PARTY RECOGNITION

The leading media figure in Israeli wine during these years was Daniel Rogov, wine critic originally with the Jerusalem Post and later with Ha'aretz. His annual Rogov's Guide was an important record of the time. However, the major step forward was in the international recognition Israel started receiving for its wines. Good reviews, high scores and prestige awards put Israeli wines in focus. The likes of Hugh Johnson and Robert Parker, Decanter and Wine Spectator began to give positive coverage to Israel. The Golan Heights Winery became the first Israeli winery to be invited to the New York Wine Experience in 1999. Domaine du Castel became the first Israeli to be awarded the maximum Four Stars in Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book in 2008. Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 was the first Israeli wine selected by the Wine Spectator in the Top 100 Wines of The Year. Robert Parker.com tasted Israeli wines for the first time in 2007. Highest scores to date were awarded to the Castel Grand Vin and Clos de Gat Muscat. In addition, Israeli wines won some pretty impressive awards. Carmel Kayoumi Shiraz 2006 won 'The International Trophy' at the Decanter World Wine Awards in 2010. The Golan Heights Winery the award for 'Best Producer Worldwide' at Vinitaly in 2011 and the next year they won the 'Wine Star Award for Best New World Winery' awarded by The Wine Enthusiast. Furthermore, sommeliers of Michelin star restaurants and wine buyers for specialist wine shops, began to taste Israeli wine firstly out of curiosity and then because of interest in what was for them a new quality wine producing country.

VICTOR SCHOENFELD: A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Suffering from the leafroll virus, the Israel wine industry was slow to come up with solutions. The Golan Heights Winery therefore decided to invest in their own Propagation Block and Nursery, which they did in cooperation with the French company, Entav. Following this, they undertook what they called Project 2020 to replace virus affected vineyards with clean plant material. The winery then decided to become sustainable according to the protocol of 'Lodi Rules' from California. These moves were led by California born Victor Schoenfeld, who became Head Winemaker in 1992 and has so far been leading the way in viticulture for over 30 years. The technology they use and data base of information they have, would impress many of the most advanced wineries the world over. Other wineries making a particular effort to become sustainable to different degrees were Galil Mountain, who amongst other things made their own compost from recycled Nespresso capsules; Tabor Winery, who introduced what they call 'ecological' vineyards; and Tzora Vineyards, who were certified by Fair'N Green.

DR. SHIBI DRORI RESEARCHES LOCAL VARIETIES

The idea of using local indigenous varieties for wine was pioneered by the Palestinian winery Cremisan. In 2008 they made wines from Baladi, Dabouki, Hamdani and Jandali. This gained notice when their Hamdani Jandali blend came in first in a tasting of Israeli whites by Jancis Robinson MW. Their consultant in this project was Italian Riccardo Cotarella.



Fadi Baterseh of Cremisan researched these varieties at Hebron University. Then Dr. Shibi Drori, winemaker of Gvaot Winery, began a project to collect, catalogue and research all the varieties his team could find throughout the country. They found over 120 varieties and of these, twenty varieties showed potential for wine. The research continues and Drori set up an experimental pilot winery at Ariel University. The first Israeli winery to make wines from these local varieties was Recanati. They produced a Marawi and Bittuni, a cooperation between a Palestinian grower and Israeli winemaker. Other wineries to make wine from one or more of these varieties are Barkan, Feldstein and Gvaot.

ERAN PICK MW – ISRAEL’S FIRST MASTER OF WINE

Israel received a great deal of positive attention when Eran Pick of Tzora Vineyards became Israel’s first ever Master of Wine. At the same time, the Wine Spectator did its first ever cover feature on Israeli wine. The Institute of Masters of Wine came on their first official visit to Israel. IPEVO, the official organization for winemakers and viticulturists, published an Israel wine map according to terroir and typography. The Judean Hills Quartet was formed, consisting of Domaine du Castel, Flam Winery, Sphera and Tzora Vineyards. This was to advance the Judean Hills as a quality wine growing region. However, it was also extremely effective in advancing the Israel wine brand. Pick’s focus on precision viticulture in one particular vineyard, symbolizes the new focus of the industry in searching for identity and a sense of place. Furthermore, the white wines of Tzora and Sphera in particular, best illustrate the great leap forward in Israeli white wines in the last decade. Ido Lewinsohn MW (ex-Recanati, Barkan and Lewinsohn Winery) followed Eran Pick to become Israel’s second Master of Wine.



ISRAEL WINE TODAY

Israel has 6,500 hectares of vineyards covering Israel from the Upper Galilee down to the Negev. The areas with the biggest boom in new vineyards are the Upper Galilee, Golan Heights and Judean Foothills. The bulk of the harvest is from August to October, but it can start in July and has occasionally gone on until the first week in November.

GRAPE VARIETIES

The most planted varieties are Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan and Merlot, followed by Shiraz/Syrah and Petit Verdot. The main whites are Colombard and Muscat of Alexandria. However, most of the quality wines seem to be made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah or Shiraz, or Bordeaux style blends, featuring Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petit Verdot. There is a revival of traditional varieties like Carignan and Petite Sirah. Grenache is making a comeback. The predominant whites are Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, followed by Riesling, Gewurztraminer Roussanne and Viognier.

The most Israeli variety is Argaman, made by a cross of Carignan with the Portuguese grape Souzao. The first Argaman was launched by Carmel in the mid 90's. The specialists of this variety are 1848 Winery, Barkan, Feldstein and Jezreel Valley. Emerald Riesling was a variety created in California in 1948, the same year of the establishment of the State of Israel. It was a cross between Riesling and Muscadelle and it never succeeded anywhere apart from Israel, where for a time, it became the most popular wine. Muscat of Alexandria is an indigenous variety to the Eastern Mediterranean and it has had a revival, due to the popularity of Moscato, the low alcohol wines made in the style of a Moscato d'Asti. Maybe the humble Carignan is in the end the variety most associated with Israel. It has been in Israel for over 150 years, being established even before the involvement of Rothschild. For 100 years it was the mainstay of the industry, and lately has been used to make quality fine wines. It is a variety that has been adopted by Israel.

Of the local Holy Land indigenous varieties, Bittuni, Dabouki, Marawi (aka Hamdani) and Jandali are the most well-known, but quantities are still tiny. These are mostly grown in the Hebron region, though Dabouki was also once grown prolifically in the State of Israel, particularly in the Coastal Plain. It was often used for distillation in the past. Recent localized expressions have been made by individual wineries including Be'er (white) and Yael (red) by Barkan, and Zuriman (red) by Dalton.

WINERIES

Today in Israel, there are technologically advanced wineries that would not be out of place in Napa or Barossa, and others where a lack of expertise is made up for by boundless passion. They cover the land of Israel from the northern border with Lebanon, down to the deepest Negev. There are moshav wineries and kibbutz wineries. There are wineries run by ultra-orthodox Jews and wineries



operated by Christian monks. There is even one called Mony, situated at a monastery, which is owned by an Israeli Arab family, and they produce kosher wines!

There are four large wineries producing over five million bottles a year – Carmel, Barkan, Golan and Teperberg, which have over 75% of the Israeli market. Other wineries producing over a million bottles of wine a year are Arza-Hayotzer, Zion, Tabor, Binyamina, Recanati, Jerusalem VW, Dalton, Tishbi and Galil Mountain. The large wineries control well over 90% of Israel's harvest. There are roughly 350 wineries in Israel. According to a recent edition of Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Guide, the top five rated Israeli wineries were: Domaine du Castel, Tzora Vineyards, Flam Winery, Sphera and Golan Heights Winery.

Israeli exports total more than US \$50 million and are increasing. Over half of the exports are to the USA and Canada. The other main market is Western Europe, mainly France, Britain, Germany, Holland and Belgium. New markets are Eastern Europe, in particular Poland & Russia, and the Far East, mainly Japan. Israeli wines are sold to more than forty countries in five continents. However, approximately 80% of Israeli wines are sold domestically.

The Israeli market has developed no end. Importers have vastly increased the number of international wines available to Israelis, even from obscure, niche wine producing countries. The main importers are Shaked, Hacarem and Israco. The knowledge of young Israelis has also improved since the founding W – Wine & Spirit (WSET approved) School, which is ensuring that the next generation is far more wine knowledgeable than the last.

WINE REGIONS

Wine growing started in the Coastal Plain in the valleys of the Southern Mt. Carmel, and in the Judean Plain, south east of Tel Aviv. With the move to quality, the concentration of vineyards moved northwards and eastwards in search of high elevation. The main vineyards for quality wines today are in the Upper Galilee and Golan Heights, and in the Judean Hills. In the last twenty years a wine route has also developed in the Central Mountains region and in the Negev Desert. IPEVO, the profession association of winemakers and viticulturists, created a wine map identifying the following fifteen regions:

GALILEE:	Upper Galilee West, Upper Galilee East, Lower Galilee;
GOLAN HEIGHTS:	Upper Golan, Lower Golan;
COASTAL PLAIN:	Zichron Ya'acov – Hanadiv Valley, Judean Coast;
CENTRAL MOUNTAINS:	Mt. Gilboa, Shomron Hills, Judean Hills, Negev Judea;
JUDEA:	Judean Foothills, Lachish;
NEGEV:	Ramat Arad, Mitzpe Ramon.



These are the regional names in use in the industry today. The registered regions with the European Community and TTB (USA) remain Galilee, Shomron, Samson, Judean Hills, Negev. Talks are underway to update the registered regions, which have been in place since the mid 1970's.

Recently jamesuckling.com tasted Israeli wines and gave some very high scores to Israeli wines. The highest scoring wines received 97 points. Twelve wines from seven different wineries scored 95 points or more. Stuart Pigott who tasted the wines wrote: *"I am seriously amazed by what rapid progress the leading winemakers of this Eastern Mediterranean country have made since my first tasting trip there in 2014. Not only are many of the new wines worthy of attention, they also begin to reflect the enormous geographical diversity and amazing cultural melting pot of this country, which invented the USB stick and drip irrigation."* He went on: *"If Israeli winemakers have anything in common, it is this spirit of innovation."*

For those exporting wine in Europe, politics is never far away. Some see Israel purely through a prism of politics. Tim Atkin MW made a good response to those who are preoccupied with these issues: *"In such a climate, tending vineyards and producing wine is an act of courage and of optimism. I have enormous admiration for the majority of Israel's winemakers.... Surrounded by anger, dogma, devastation, deprivation, mutual suspicion and....politics, they offer the possibility of hope for a better future."*

In terms of climate, cuisine and character, Israel is both Mediterranean and Middle Eastern. A New World wine country set in the winemaking center of the Ancient World. The new quality combined with a rich history make Israel a country of unique interest to wine historians, wine lovers and connoisseurs.

ASM, 2023



ISRAELI WINERIES

WINERY	LOCATION	OWNER	VINEYARDS Main Region	PRODUCTION Bottles (m)
Carmel	Alon Tabor	Carmel Corp	Mt. Carmel	> 10
Barkan-Segal	Hulda	Tempo Beverages	Judea	> 10
Golan Heights	Katzrin	Golan & Galilee Vineyards	Golan	> 5
Teperberg	Tzora	Teperberg family	Judea	> 5
Arza-Hayotzer	Mishor Adumim	Motti Shor	Judea	> 2
Zion	Mishor Adumim	Shor family	Judea	> 2
Tabor	Kfar Tabor	IBBLS / CBC	Galilee	> 2
Binyamina	Binyamina	Hazi Hinam	Galilee	> 1.5
Recanati	Ramat Dalton	Lenny Recanati	Galilee	> 1.5
Jerusalem	Atarot	Guetta family	Judea	> 1.5
Dalton	Ramat Dalton	Haruni family	Galilee	> 1
Tishbi	Binyamina	Tishbi family	Mt. Carmel	> 1
Galil Mountain	Yiron	Golan Heights Winery	Galilee	> 1



ISRAELI VINEYARDS

VINEYARDS	Dunams	%
Golan Heights	13,200	20%
Galilee	13,850	21%
Coastal Plain	16,150	25%
Central		
Mountains	6,650	11%
Judea	12,050	19%
Negev	1,480	3%
Others	1,720	3%



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