

## KOSHER WINE – AN EXPLANATION

Adhering to kashrut is essential to all Jews who observe the Jewish Dietary Laws. However, the regulations for wine differ from those of food. Whereas the kashrut of food depends on the source from which it came, the kashrut of wine depends on who handles it. The Kosher wine rules were made so an observant Jew could avoid drinking *Yayin Nesech* – a wine used by non-Jews to make libations for idol worship and *Stam Yeinam* – ordinary wine made by and for non-Jews. They are the oldest codified wine laws, and some of them date back to the Bible. The word Kosher means pure.

### AT THE WINERY

For wine to be certified as kosher, the following regulations need to be followed at the winery.

1. Only religious Jews may handle the product and touch the winemaking equipment from the time the grapes arrive at the winery. The definition of a religious Jew for this purpose is one who is *Shomer Shabbat* – who observes the Sabbath. Therefore, a Jewish winemaker who is not orthodox is not allowed to draw samples from the barrels. It can be frustrating for a hands-on winemaker, but though it is a nuisance, it is not a restriction that affects quality.

2. Only kosher items or substances may be used in the winemaking process. Yeasts, fining & cleaning materials have to be certified as kosher and must not be derived from animal by-products. An example of fining agents not permitted include gelatin (animal derivative), casein (dairy derivative) and isinglass (because it comes from a non-kosher fish.)

Kosher certification therefore does guarantee a significant degree of control as to what may be added to wine. Kosher wine is perfectly suitable for vegetarians – and vegans too, if egg white is not used for fining.

### IN THE VINEYARD

Kosher wines produced in France, Italy & California, only have to observe these two criteria. In Israel – *Eretz Ha' Kodesh* (The Holy Land), kosher wine producers also have to observe the following agricultural laws which date back to the agrarian society in Biblical times:



- a. **Orlah.** For the first three years, fruit from the vine may not be used for winemaking. The flower buds are removed to prevent fruit formation. In the fourth year the vine can bear fruit and a winemaker is permitted to use the grapes. Most wine growers will anyway choose not to use fruit for the first few years for quality reasons.
- b. **Kilai Ha'Kerem** – Cross breeding. Growing other fruits between the vines is prohibited. In places like Portugal a family may train its vines high, and grow its vegetables underneath. This was something done in domestic vineyards in Spain & Italy in the past – but anyone interested in quality has abandoned this practice.
- c. **Shmittah** – Sabbatical Year. There is a law recorded in the Bible which states that every seventh year, the fields should be left fallow and allowed to rest. However, because of economic realities, there are creative ways to cope with this situation and solutions are agreed between Rabbis and wineries which allow a degree of flexibility. Most wineries will arrange for a *Heter Mechira* (special permission to sell) or for an *Otzar Beit Din* (the supervision of a Rabbinical Court) for the Shmittah year. The idea of resting the land or introducing a nitrogen cycle is a common practice in today's agriculture.
- d. **Terumot & Ma'aserot.** This is a symbolic ceremony when over one percent of the production is poured away in remembrance of the ten per cent tithe once paid to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Both this & Shmittah are hardest to explain to non-Jews. In fact, they both give a strong message of social justice and egalitarianism. The concept of giving the land and its workers a sabbatical year and reserving part of the harvest for those who needed it, was a socially progressive idea in Biblical times. These practices address the profoundest issues of spirituality versus materialism, but today they remain largely symbolic.

There are three basic categories of kosher wine, which are as follows:

**Kosher.** Permissible for Jews who observe the Jewish Dietary Laws. There will normally be a small symbol on the back label to denote the Rabbinical supervision.

**Kosher for Passover.** Wine that has not come into contact with bread, grain or products made with leavened dough. Most kosher wines are also "Kosher for Passover".

**Kosher le Mehadrin.** Wine for which the rules of kashrut have been stringently approved.



### QUALITY KOSHER

The word kosher should not imply a lack of quality. Notice there are no regulations affecting the quality of the wine and standard winemaking procedures are followed in the fermentation, maturation, blending and bottling.

To the Jewish world, kosher wines are a necessity, but there is no technical reason why a kosher table wine should automatically be considered inferior to a non-kosher one. Many of Israel's best performing, highest scoring, award winning wines, just happen to be those that are also kosher. For example, Castel, Flam, Tzora and Yarden, producing some of Israel's finest wines, are all kosher. Castel won world acclaim as a non-kosher winery. Since it reverted to become kosher in 2003, the international recognition the winery has received has been even better than previously. The message is that a good wine is well-made, and a bad wine is badly made. Whether it is kosher or not is totally irrelevant to its quality.

At the same time, do not assume that all Israeli wines are kosher. The words 'Israeli wine' and 'kosher' are not automatically interchangeable. Despite the fact that approximately 55% of Israeli wineries are kosher, 45% of them are not. The paradox is that most of Israeli wine *is* kosher. The reason is that all the largest and medium sized wineries follow the kosher route.

### YAYIN MEVUSHAL & KIDDUSH WINES

So, if kosher wines can be so good, why do they sometimes have a bad image? Maybe the concept of *Yayin Mevushal* (literally 'cooked wine') and sweet kiddush wines have something to do with it.

**Yayin Mevushal.** There is a requirement from some Kosher caterers, and restaurateurs of kosher restaurants particularly in the United States, to only serve '*Yayin Mevushal*', to satisfy their strictly orthodox customers. This is a wine that has been flash pasteurized so it remains kosher even if a non-observant or non-Jewish waiter serves the wine. Whether a wine is *Yayin Mevushal* or not, makes no difference to the kashrut of the wine, but it preserves and maintains the kashrut for those for whom it is important. A wine that is not *mevushal*, is no less kosher than one that is.

The category exists for those that need them. The process of flash pasteurization is not ideal, but techniques have got so much better over the years, that the effect is minimalized. It is true that



some very good *mevushal* wines are made these days. However, it is sufficient to say that given a choice, most of the famous Israeli brands and virtually all the better wines are not *mevushal*. Those that make a *mevushal* cuvee, usually do it like a private label for a specific market.

**Kiddush Wines.** It is the ‘kiddush’ or sacramental wine that has done most damage. Often tasting like syrupy sugared water, the importance to the consumer has always tended to be price and religious certification rather than quality. These wines are often used by Jewish communities or families to make Kiddush – the blessing over wine on Friday night, or to start every festival. The custom grew because a sweet wine lasted from week to week and the children also liked it. However, the consumer should not confuse sweet kiddush wines with dry kosher wines. Today, most kosher wines are dry table wines and there is nothing written that a wine used for religious ritual cannot be a drinkable table wine. In fact, sales of traditional kiddush wines are in decline as religious families turn to grape juice or table wines instead.

Israeli wine represents for the religious Jew the largest range and best quality kosher wines in the world. If Champagne is considered the primary expert in sparkling wine and New Zealand is known for focusing on Sauvignon Blanc, then it may be said that Israel are the specialists in making kosher wine. However, for the rest of the world, Israeli wines represent high quality, from an exotic region in the Eastern Mediterranean, and it is of secondary importance if the wine is kosher or not. The objective for wineries producing kosher wines remains *‘to make the best possible wines.... that just happen to be kosher!’*

*“No-one should avoid wines simply because they have kosher certification. It seems generally irrelevant.”* **Mark Squires, Wine Advocate, RobertParker.com**

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