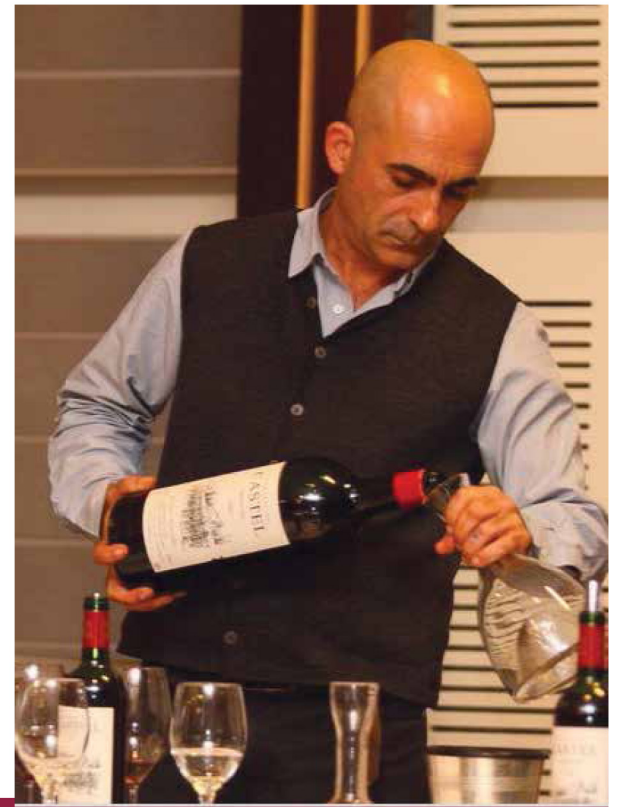




TERRAVINO: ISRAEL'S main international wine & spirits competition. (Photos: Ish Anavim)

HAIM GAN, wine entrepreneur and educator, decanting a large bottle of Castel Grand Vin.



A LAND OF FISH, OLIVE OIL, AND WHITE WINE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Israel was a bit of a wine culture backwater in the early 1990s. When I first came across Haim Gan, though, I was immediately impressed with his knowledge and dedication. To be honest, he stood out in an industry in which knowledge of professional wine service was pretty sparse. I felt I was meeting a kindred spirit, and I immediately respected him.

He had been handpicked by chef Yisrael Aharoni to open the Tapuach Zahav (Golden Apple) restaurant. Gan was their first wine waiter. A young man by the name of Yonatan Roshfeld became the sous-chef. I have had some experience in eating out, and I still believe it was the best quality restaurant I have experienced in 35 years in the country. I remember hosting wine great Robert Mondavi there.

I next came across Gan when he was the restaurant manager at Capot Tamarim. This was one of the first restaurants to showcase the chutzpah, creativity, and variety of the new Israeli chef, devoted to local ingredients. It was the forerunner of the Israeli chef revolution, which has reached Europe and America in the last 10 to 15 years or so.

Gan was not born with a silver tastevin (traditional sommelier's wine cup) in his mouth. He was a son of Jaffa. His father was a fisherman. Gan served in the IDF paratroopers and earned a plucky, determined reputation for coping with whatever was thrown at him and coming up trumps, stronger and smiling. When it came time to travel, most of his contemporaries went to South America or the Far East. Gan decided to go to

Europe. A chance meeting on a train led to the idea of traveling to a winery. "What is a winery?" Gan asked!

It was when he visited a winery in the Loire Valley that something resonated within him. He decided to stay in France and offered to work there for a few months. This was Gan's introduction to the wine world. Then, with enthusiasm growing, he went to Bordeaux to absorb some of the wine culture there. Wine is very aspirational. The more you know, the more you want to know.

Next, he traveled to America and gained experience working in restaurants in Miami. He was happy there but swiftly returned to Israel for reserve duty at the outset of the Gulf War. His international experience, along with a whiff of wine in Europe, blended with his drive and hunger to learn, set him apart. That was why he was considered a catch by restaurants of the caliber of Tapuach Zahav and Capot Tamarim.

After that, Gan was a sought-after name in wine circles. He was passionate, knowledgeable, had impeccable standards of service, and was incredibly enthusiastic. This brushed off on others.

It was not long before the corporate world came knocking at his door. Carmi Lebenstein was the crafty and innovative marketing manager at Carmel Mizrahi. This was then by far Israel's largest winery, virtually a monopoly. She persuaded Gan to join as education manager and professional manager for hotels and restaurants. During his time there, he strove to improve Carmel's image and attended the legendary Carmel tastings.

I had some experience with those, admittedly though from a few years previously. They were probably the most unprofessional tastings I ever participat-



ISH ANAVIM is a mecca for wine courses and professional tastings.

ed in. Food and olives were on the table, and some tasted wine through a mouthful of flaky and greasy burekas. The senior manager would say what he thought before anyone had a chance to open their mouths, and then criticize the professional team; and before the end of the tasting, someone would light up a cigarette. I can put names to these memories, but out of respect for the people concerned, I will not do so here.

Of course, I must point out that the Carmel Winery of today is leaps and bounds away from the Carmel Mizrahi of the 1990s, but I am just setting the scene of how it was.

During Gan's time, he was fortunate to work with a whole battalion of winemakers, who all made names for themselves. These included Israel Flam (now Flam Winery); Koby Gat (both Carmel loyalists for decades); Shiki Rauchberger (now Teperberg); Philippe Lichtenstein (now Arza-Hayotzer); Gil Shatzberg (ex-Amphorae, Recanati); Arkadi Papikian (ex Dalton, Amphorae); Zvi Skaist (now Teperberg, ex Jerusalem, Barkan). It was quite a team.

When Carmi Lebenstein left, Gan decided to go it alone and become independent. At the turn of the millennium, he founded a new start-up called Ish Anavim (Grape Man) based in Jaffa. His partner was Sarel Shany, greatly respected for his wine knowledge, too. Their concept was to be an independent body advancing wine culture, giving wine courses, holding tastings, and offering wine consultancy services. This was much needed, as wine education was dominated by the wineries, in particular the Golan Heights Winery and Carmel.

The Golan Heights Winery promoted wine service through its Yarden Award for Wine Service and founded the first-ever wine school, which was managed by a young Yair Haidu, now considered one of the leading wine experts in Israel. Carmel was known for its wine courses taught by Koby Gat and its barman's courses led by Tal Gal Cohen. However good they were, and they were all professional, they were seen as being sponsored by "the big wineries."

There were slow beginnings at Ish Anavim. The first wine course took seven months to fill. Eventually, Gan took over Shany's share and went on alone. From then on until now, Gan became one of Israel's most prolific wine educators.

A number of people have stood out for their contribution to wine education. Legendary names include Israel Assayel, wine store owner and autodidact who was giving courses when I arrived in Israel. The afore-

mentioned Koby Gat was known for his courses at Rishon Le Zion Cellars for decades. Winemaker Barry Saslove became an enthusiastic and inspiring educator in the 1990s. Nir Shaham has run his Soreq Winery Winemaking School for 30 years. Sommelier Gal Zohar founded his influential W Wine & Spirit School (WSET approved) in 2016.

HOWEVER, HAIM GAN'S reign as an educator has lasted all this time. He is a guru-like figure with a following. Those who completed one of his wine courses return for his special Open House tastings at the end of the week. And the really keen ones travel with Gan as their guide, visiting the most famous wine regions in Europe. Those who fall under his charismatic spell follow his every word with absolute loyalty. Wine education has been his main contribution over the last 25 years, but he has done so much more.

He founded the Terravino International Wine & Spirits Challenge in 2006. This was Israel's first international wine-tasting competition. He brought experts from abroad to be judges and decided that the rules and procedures would be according to those laid down by the OIV (the International Organisation of Vine and Wine), the main wine administrative body worldwide. Terravino became part of our calendar, and this year Gan organized the competition for the 18th year. To his great credit, he managed to do so in a year of war, grief, and upheaval. It gave us all the important message that life must go on, especially in tough times.

Gan organized the first IsraWinExpo. This was a proper authentic international wine exhibition, and though we have plenty of wine festivals and a successful trade show, we miss this fully-fledged exhibition to proudly showcase Israeli wine.

Gan was one of the first people to promote white wines here. He says: "Israel should mean fish and not meat; olive oil and not butter; and"... this was the punch line: "white wines, not red wines!" Of course, at the time he first said this, Israelis mainly drank red wines. Furthermore, many wine drinkers would boast: "I only drink red wines," thinking that this statement alone would qualify them to be considered great experts.

However, Gan was a prophet. He went ahead with promoting white wines, without the support of the wineries. Now his annual White Festival in the Herzliya Pituah Marina is packed with wineries and visitors showing their white wines and rosés. Since Gan went rogue on whites, there has been a white

wine quality revolution in Israel, and whites are coming back in. People are realizing what Gan realized first: White wines go better with both our climate and cuisine.

Many auctions have featured occasional Israeli wines, but there was never an auction exclusively for wine here. That was until Gan founded the Claret Auction House, prepared a beautiful catalogue, and organized a smoothly run auction. He creatively organized an international competition for wine labels. He edited an Israel wine book that appeared in Russian, called *Vinoland*. This educated a whole generation of new Russian immigrants who were wine drinkers. With wine critics Yair Koren and Sagi Cooper as partners, he authored an Israeli wine book that was published in Hebrew and English. It was called *The Comprehensive Guide to Israeli Wines*.

Gan has also been a consultant and friend to many wineries. One of them was a small domestic winery at Kibbutz Nir Oz, which was Gideon Fauker's baby.

When Hamas invaded on that black Oct. 7, they brutally murdered Gideon Fauker. Furthermore, his partners Chaim Peri and Gadi Mozes were kidnapped to Gaza. The grapes had been harvested, but there was no one to look after the wine. Gan, who had known them for years through the activities of the Eshkol Wine Club, sprang into action. He commanded winemakers Shibi Drori of Gvaot Winery and Meiram Harel of Amphorae Winery to assist, and the three of them cleaned up the winery and took care of the wine. There will be wine from Nir Oz Winery from the 2023 harvest... thanks to Haim Gan.

It will be a fitting memorial to Gideon Fauker. May his memory be a blessing.

What is Haim Gan's vision for the future? He says there has to be proper regulations here like in wine industries elsewhere. He has a vision of an extensive museum to tell the story of our wine renaissance, as well as international wine schools for sommeliers and winemakers. He foresees a time when there will be 1,000 wineries here, and consumption will increase to 11 or 12 liters per head. He explains that all this will happen with evolution, not revolution.

Let's hope Haim Gan maintains his energy and ability to think outside the box and be ahead of the game. He has contributed so much to Israeli wine. Long may it continue. ■

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



PIONEERING WHITE Wine Festival is a very popular annual event promoting white wines and rosé, held in the spectacular Herzliya Marina setting (R).