

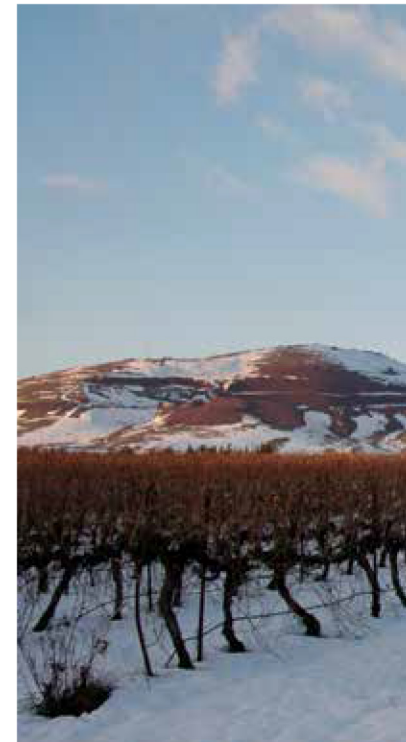
THE GOLAN Heights Winery is situated in the town of Katzrin, high up on the Heights. (Kfir Haravi)

THE FAMOUS El Rom vineyard in the northern, high-elevation Golan. (Rina Nagila)

Below:

(L) Yael Gai is the foreign minister of the Golan Heights Winery since 2007. (Golan Heights Winery)

THE GAJA family, one of the most renowned names in the world of wine, represent the Golan Heights Winery in Italy. (Gaja)



ALREADY OVER 40 YEARS



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

An exclusive excerpt from the writer's recently published book *Golan Heights Winery: Forty Years of Quality, Innovation and Authenticity*.

The Golan Heights Winery taught the Israeli wine industry about state-of-the-art viticulture and New World winemaking technology.

It also taught the wine trade about marketing a quality product of prestige and value. This included selling an image rather than just cases of wine, and emphasized the importance of wine education, professional wine service, gastronomy, and wine tourism as integral parts of the overall effort. This was a revolutionary message in Israel at the time.

Up front, above all else, was the concept of success through people. The winery understood it was part of the people business, not just the wine business. After all, everything is personal in the end. Whether it was co-opting growers to grow wine, creating a sense of family at the winery, moving closer to the end customer, or maintaining positive relationships with retailers and sommeliers, Golan Heights Winery was the first to teach the industry that the personal approach is how it is done.

The winery also demonstrated to other Israeli wineries that with all due respect to Israel, successful wine brands are created overseas. This was achieved with great success; there is no doubt that for the last forty years, the number one winery flying the flag for Israel around the world is Golan Heights Winery. The most famous Israeli wine label is Yarden; and if one had to pick a single Israeli wine to represent this journey, it would arguably be Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon – Israel's most consistent award-winning wine.

The United States has always been the most important region for export sales of Israeli wine. The idea that people with credibility in the big wide wine world would help advance Israeli wine was not a



given early on. Shimshon Welner, the founding CEO of Golan Heights Winery, recalls attending tastings where he was virtually ignored. Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* wrote at the time: "He barely knew the difference between Chateau Lafite and grape juice."

But Welner was a quick learner, and his first conclusion was that he needed to import expertise. He was right. As soon as he had Californian wine consultant Peter Stern by his side, people took the time to taste the wine and treated the Israeli vintners with respect. Stern was to become the pivotal figure in the Israel wine revolution.

Eventually Winebow, a company specializing in quality handpicked wines, became the winery's importer in New York, the most important and cosmopolitan wine market in the United States. The American wine press (epitomized by critics Frank J. Prial and Howard G. Goldberg) and general interest articles in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* all played a part in spreading the message.



THE MOST important country for the winery's image was the United Kingdom. There, the winery first came into contact with Peter Hallgarten. He was managing director of House of Hallgarten, founded by his father. Peter was a doyen of the English wine trade, a specialist in German wines and an inventor of liqueurs. He recalled visiting the Golan Heights Winery in the mid-'80s and meeting Shimshon Welner and Peter Stern, and he was very impressed.

Hallgarten became the importer of Yarden and Gamla to Great Britain, and Peter became part of the extended family and a fervent supporter of Israeli wine. At the time he wrote: "The pioneers of the Golan are using modern techniques, patience, skill, and dedication to create a new wine region which proudly takes its place on the world wine map."

The influence of individuals such as Peter Stern and Peter Hallgarten and companies such as Winebow and Hallgarten Wines helped convey a message of quality and promoted the idea that Israel and quality wine



RECENTLY PUBLISHED book on the Golan Heights Winery, available at the winery's Visitors' Center in both Hebrew and English. (Holle Studio)

YARDEN CABERNET Sauvignon is the flagship of the winery and an award winner for over 40 years. (Golan Heights Winery)



could be part of the same sentence.

After Shimshon Welner broke the door down, the Golan Heights Winery's first foreign minister was Doron Rand. As the winery's marketing manager, Rand was the person who consolidated exports in the USA. Eventually, he decided to bring the wines together under one roof, and Royal Wine Corp., importers of Gamla from the beginning, became the exclusive importers.

Royal remained importers until the turn of the millennium, when later CEO Shalom Blayer decided to go it alone and founded Yarden Inc. It was Royal Wine's success with the Golan Heights Winery that later prompted them to specialize in Israeli wine. Yarden Inc. remains the winery's wholly owned subsidiary for importing the wines to the US and marketing them to the different distributors in individual states.

The author took over from Doron Rand as export manager for Europe, America, Asia, and the rest of the world, and closed many key agreements with companies that would be associated with the winery for the next 25 years. Notable examples include Hawesko in Germany; Gaja in Italy; Chacalli in Belgium; AMKA in Denmark; and Millesimes in Japan. All have been long-term representatives of the winery ever since, and remain so to this day.

ONE IMPORTANT new importer was Gaja in Italy. Angelo Gaja is the legendary name behind Italy's most famous winery, and Gaja Distribuzione is an import and distribution company representing the most prestigious wines and best wine accessories from each country. It was an immense compliment when they started to import wines from the Golan Heights Winery. They started out modestly with three Yarden wines, but the range and quantities have since grown.

What interest does Golan Heights Winery hold for an importer that represents the finest wineries in the world? Rossana Gaja explains: "Our partnership began after my father, Angelo, on a business trip to Israel, tasted one of the wines. He was really pleasantly surprised by the quality."

Angelo Gaja says: "The Golan Heights Winery has become the Israel wine flag in the world. It has been able to build an image that has created a benefit to all other Israeli wineries." He adds: "There is amazing elegance in the aging of their wines, especially the reds, which keep a great freshness and structure. This is an

aspect our customers fell in love with."

AMKA puts it another way: "We have skilled partners from all over the world, delivering top quality wines at competitive prices. Golan Heights Winery fits these criteria and always delivers. The wines have unique characteristics from a reasonably new part of the world."

Ernie Singer, founder and CEO of Millesimes in Japan, says: "We represent 100 wineries, and the wines of the Golan Heights Winery are our biggest sellers." If it were New York, I would understand, but Japan? That really is a statement! He goes on: "The quality-price ratio of their wines is so good."

When asked how his relationship with the winery began, he explains: "I went to Vinexpo Hong Kong, met with Adam Montefiore, and told him we wanted to represent the winery. He explained they had someone, so I told him to tell them they were fired!" This long-term relationship has been very beneficial to both sides.

SKURNIK WINES of New York is another company whose image automatically says something about the wineries they list. "We are proud to represent the wines of the Golan Heights Winery... because the overall quality aligns with our company mission," David Skurnik explains. He goes on: "Golan Heights Winery represents a big leap forward for Israel in expressing the terroir of a region. The winery is unique, in that it touches the wine world in so many different styles and price points."

Michael Skurnik adds: "My favorite 'go to' wine with steak is almost always Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon." Funnily enough, the author had his eyes on Skurnik Wines and met with Michael over twenty years ago to try to interest them in Golan's wines. Therefore, it was good to see them finally agree to represent Yarden Inc. in New York from 2019.

Today the winery's foreign minister is Yael Gai, who has represented the winery overseas since 2007. She has become the face of the winery looking outward and its spokesperson in the wine world as a whole.

To her great credit, she has grown exports considerably in Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland, and Scandinavia. These are places where the kosher market is small, negligible, or nonexistent. So in these countries the wines represent Israel, the Levant, and even the Eastern Mediterranean on their merits, and are sold as

high-quality wines in their own right.

This is exactly where they should be. The wines have proven successful in an arena where they are not dependent on the kosher market. Most shipments are sent directly from the winery. However, Yael Gai has an expedient arrangement whereby Casimex, the winery's agent in France, supplies small or individual orders elsewhere in Europe.

She has also made inroads into the Far East and Latin America, and was the first to take advantage of the Abraham Accords by exporting to the United Arab Emirates and Morocco. In fact, wherever there is Israeli wine, it is the Golan Heights Winery that leads the way and is there first. This has never been truer than today.

IN THIS era of social media, with its plethora of competitions and bloggers, points are thrown at wines from all over. The Golan Heights Winery learned early on to strive for quality over quantity. What started with the IWSC in London and the Challenge International du Vin in Bordeaux, continued to Mundus Vini in Germany, then Vinitaly, right up to the Decanter World Wine Awards.

The winery entered the competitions that mattered. One thing that was immediately apparent was the winery's success in different styles. Many wineries specialize and become known for a particular wine style or variety. But Golan Heights Winery won awards at the very highest level across the full spectrum of wine styles and price points.

If each sector is taken individually, the Yarden Blanc de Blancs, Yarden Odem Chardonnay, Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon, and Yarden Heights Wine have been the most prolific medal-winning Israeli wines in the categories of sparkling, white, red, and dessert wines, respectively. The big daddy of them all remains the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon, from the gold medal and Winiarski Trophy at the IWSC in 1987 to the "Wine Spectator Critics Award" in 2022.

The world's greatest wine writers and critics, including Hugh Johnson, Jancis Robinson MW, and Robert Parker, awarded the Golan Heights Winery the highest possible international recognition, as did the *Wine Spectator*, *Decanter*, *Wine Enthusiast*, and *Wine Advocate*.

Then there were the exhibitions. In the early days, Golan was the only Israeli winery present. From then on, the winery has been at every important wine exhibition. When part of an official "Israel Stand" alongside other wineries, Golan invariably attracts the most attention. But even when they are the only winery exhibiting, they always do so under a large "Israel" sign, highlighting the fact that they are ambassadors for the rest of the industry.

The winery exports to more than 32 countries on five continents. By participating as a serious player in the forum of world wine, Golan has been welcomed into the club of the world's most famous wineries. This has reflected back on its success on the local Israel market.

As the winery prepares to enter its fifth decade, sommeliers, retailers, and wine lovers looking for a representative of the Eastern Mediterranean will often alight on Yarden, Gamla, or Hermon wines. It is clear that in the court of international opinion, the Golan Heights Winery retains its role as the number one ambassador of Israeli wine throughout the wine world. ■

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