

OBLASS WINES are interested in and work with rare grape varieties. (Photos: Oblass Wines)

ISRAELI WINEMAKER Zlil Oblass (R) with a wine grower in Italy.

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS, HANDS DEEP IN THE SOIL



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

I had seen wines around with the brand name “Oblass” on the label and was curious. Wine lovers were mentioning them in passing, and some people I respect in the industry were listing them. It bothered me that I, who was supposed to be up to date, had not come across these wines. So, I decided to investigate and invited Zlil Oblass for an interview.

We met, and I looked forward to finding out the inner workings of Oblass Wines. Amusingly enough in hindsight, it was one of the more unsatisfactory interviews I have done; it was like wrestling with jelly. In a wine tasting, you discover a wine has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

After an hour of talking, I normally reach a finite conclusion and can establish how someone got into wine, what they did in the meantime, and where they are now. It should be logical and simple – guests talk, and I frantically scribble to catch up. People are normally very fluent talking about themselves.

With Zlil, however, I eventually stopped writing. It was all just too disjointed to get the basic picture (hence, the perhaps less ordered structure of this article). What I received was topsy-turvy, but I caught a glimpse of the diamond in the rough.

He is a fascinating person, a totally original gem, who followed his own unconventional path, without fear or favor. Here is an Israeli making wine all over the place. This was not someone who studied abroad, did a stage at a famous winery, and then returned to open his dream winery in Israel.

Zlil’s driving forces were different. The bees in his bonnet were natural wine, spontaneously fermentation, and unusual grape varieties, but the wines had to have drinkability and good value. Two slogans he uses are “A journey of wild wines” and “A journey to find interesting local vines.” Put them together, and you get the picture.

One of the first things I asked Zlil Oblass was about his name. It has a certain ring to it. I learned that Zlil

is not a nickname, but the original idea came from his musician mother: In Hebrew, *zlil* means “musical sound or note.” The family name Oblass comes from Austria. The Teperberg family also came from there.

His journey into wine was not a standard one. Oblass was born in Tel Aviv and lives in Jaffa. He graduated with a degree in philosophy. His mind was buried deep into the souls of man and culture. He studied anthropology; he sees wine as an extension of this. He volunteered for a harvest because “wine is artistic agriculture.” In 2012, he arrived in Italy and began his wine studies at the University of Turin in Piedmont. Then, unconventional to the last, he finished them at the University of Florence, in Tuscany.

Oblass interned at the private winery of the iconic Alberto Antonini and learned about natural fermentations, wild yeasts, and minimum intervention wines. This experience opened a window in his mind. He was

hooked, and finished his studies with a thesis on natural yeasts. He then spent time at Michele Satta’s winery in Bolgheri, on the Tuscan coast, followed by Wither Hills Winery in Marlborough, New Zealand – two very different experiences.

His initial buzz was the idea of making two unconventional blends. It even became a compulsion for him. In Israel, it was to be a Malbec combined with a Barbera: something different. These two varieties contrast and complement each other and are rarely blended together.

In Italy, what caught his roving eye was the unlikely Brachetto, an undistinguished grape from Piedmont, usually made into sweet red sparkling wines. Here, he looked under the covers and saw the potential to blend it with the local Barbera to make a dry red wine. That was the plan, anyway. These two ideas showed that Oblass had his hunches, which he followed deter-



minedly with belief, not to be discouraged by skeptics.

What has recently been happening is that grapes which are rarely talked about and thought of as being unsophisticated have come in from the cold. Look at Carignan and Colombard in Israel, or Arneis and Aligote of Piedmont and Burgundy. Think where they were 15 years ago, and the new interest in them today. These second-tier varieties, after having been ignored forever, suddenly became of interest. In the last decade, there has been almost a fetish to discover and unearth ancient varieties. And in Italy, of course, there is no lack of these.

ZLIL OBLASS became a traveling winemaker, creating wine in Portugal, Piedmont, Puglia, and Israel. Each individual wine has its own search of renovation and renewal, while going against the grain in search of the unlikely or unknown. The holy grail for him was wines that show authenticity from unusual varieties.

I had originally tasted two Oblass wines, and both left an impression. They were different, each a unique, original expression. The Oblass Taglio 2020 is a blend of Albarossa and Brachetto, produced in the beautiful region of Asti. Who would have thought of that? Someone with superior insight... or maybe a fertile imagination.

Albarossa is a little-known cross of Barbera and Nebbiolo, the two well-known varieties of Piedmont. The result of the blend is very drinkable. Light- to medium-bodied, it has good but restrained cherry berry fruit, and a rustic, almost rough mouthfeel with excellent, refreshing acidity and tannins. The raunchy, raw acidity reminds me of pomegranate juice: edgy, unusual, interesting, and very drinkable.

Susu is a red in an attractively shaped dumpy bottle, not unlike a 19th-century beer bottle. It is made from the grape Susumaniello, which comes from Puglia in southern Italy. Its name Susu, which means "horse," came from its abundant yield which enabled "loading the donkey" that would then bring the baskets of fruit to the winery. Hence, I suppose, the quizzical donkey drawing on the label. Donkeys had been used in our regional harvest for thousands of years.

Zion Winery, founded in 1848, used to use them for bringing the grapes from Hebron at harvest and delivering the wine. They are still used by some Cypriot and Palestinian wineries. For me, the donkey is one of the symbols of domestic, rural agriculture in the Eastern Mediterranean, and they are still used elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Who would not love the Susu label?

But wine is more than a label. Susu 2022 is very deeply colored and juicy, with a black fruit and ripe plum aroma, a fruit-led texture, mouth-coating flavor, and a gentle tannin that refreshes.

LATER, I tasted some others in the range. His Moscato d'Asti 2022 is made from Moscato Bianco in the Asti region. This is the home of Moscato, which became a fad worldwide. In America, they called it Moscato madness. Bartenura Moscato became the largest selling wine in the kosher market (excluding Manischewitz, of course), and Carmel's Buzz has become a million-bottle brand. Moscato is the wine for the great-aunt who doesn't like wine but will love any Moscato.

However, this is a Moscato with a difference. Of course, low alcohol, frizzante with a delicate sweetness like you would expect, but this a more intellectual expression with fruit blossoming from the glass.



It has complexity and great balancing acidity. It is a winemaker's Moscato, more restrained and with more nuance than the less expensive brands.

The Oblass Biba is a blend of Moscato Bianco and Cortese, the grape that is also from Asti and became known through the Gavi wines. It fits the Oblass typecast: unusual varieties, naturally fermented with wild yeast naturally on the grapes, and made with minimum intervention. It is a fruit basket brimming with aromas of tropical fruits, grapefruit and lemony flavors. It is light and elegant in the mouth and very refreshing.

The Oblass Brica Rosso 2018 is an older expression of the Albarossa Bracheto blend, which has the benefit of more bottle age. It has more depth than the Taglio and a sure sign that this wine will age well. The tannin and acidity will ensure it will last. Simply enchanting... enchantingly different. All the Asti wines of Oblass are made from the vineyards of Viotti Vine in Castel Rocchero, Asti in Piedmont.

NOW THERE is a new addition to the portfolio, the Alpynia. This one has a cheeky camel face on the label, so it makes a pair with the donkey on the Susu label. They both come in the same characterful bottle. However, whereas the Susu is a red from the south, this is a white from the far north. Part of the charm of Italy is that it has its head in the snowy Alps and its feet (Sicily) almost in North Africa.



VINO FROM Puglia with a donkey on the label; the grape variety means 'loading the donkey.'

This wine comes from Trevenezie in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region. It is a white wine called Sauvage Blanc. *Sauvage* means "wild" (like savage) and has come to mean a wine made by minimum intervention from wild yeasts. The word "Sauvignon" Blanc is thought to have originated from the word "*sauvage*." The Alpynia is, in fact, a blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling. It has a prominent tropical fruit nose with a steely, mineral texture and a refreshing finish.

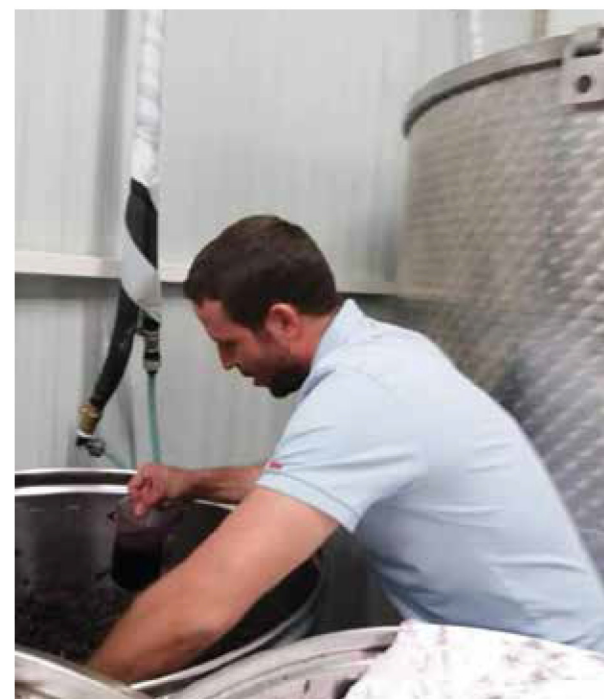
I will be particularly interested to taste Oblass's Israeli expression of Old Vine Carignan, which he made from an old established vineyard in Shefaya, just north east of Zichron Ya'acov, in the valleys of Mount Carmel.

Carignan has been in Israel for 150 years. It was brought here by the Mikve Israel Agricultural School even before Baron de Rothschild invested in Israeli wine and founded a modern Israel wine industry. It was to become the mainstay of Israeli wine because of its high yields and its flexibility in providing options. Only since the 2000s has Carignan been associated with quality wines. Because of its longevity here, it really is Israel's "adopted" or heritage variety. The Oblass Carignan was described by *Calcalist* as "a very good wine, very tasty – and, above all, very Israeli."

Unusual for an intellectual with his head alternately stuck in the clouds and buried deep in the soil, the consumer was important to him. He particularly wanted to produce wines that were not only good quality but also inexpensive. A certain drinkability appears to be a quality of all Oblass wines. That would ring true with the *raison d'être* of the man. In a time of globalization, internationalization, and sameness, Zlil Oblass is a hidden pearl we should cherish.

He is making wines that are innovative and enjoyable – and distinct. They are worthy of interest and deserve the respect of wine lovers and connoisseurs alike.

The writer is a wine trade veteran and a winery insider turned wine writer. He has advanced Israeli wine for 38 years and is known as the 'English voice of Israeli wine.'
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OBLASS USES large used oak barrels, so the effect of oak is not dominant.

ZLIL OBLASS is a minimum-intervention winemaker.