



**RAGING FIRE** alongside a Galil Mountain vineyard on the Lebanon border. (Galil Mountain Winery)

**EXPLOSIONS TOO** close for comfort viewed from Dalton Winery. (Dalton Winery)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**B**aron Edmond de Rothschild founded the Israeli wine industry by planting vineyards on the coastal plain. These were in the valleys of the southern Mount Carmel region, and also southeast of what was to become Tel Aviv. When the quality revolution took place from the 1980s onward, Israeli wine gradually moved northward and eastward in search of altitude. At high elevations, the climate was cooler, the growing season was longer, and this was more conducive to a quality product.

Today, more than 40% of Israeli vineyards are situated in the Galilee, which borders Lebanon, and on the Golan Heights, which borders Syria.

On October 8, 2023, Hezbollah decided to offer its support to Hamas by bombing Israel. This was an illogical decision; a luxury fueled by hubris. There is no Palestinian issue and no border dispute between Lebanon and Israel, but Hezbollah felt it had to justify its existence. So it started bombing northern Israel every day without respite. This has gone on for over a year.

The wine industry has suffered particularly since the atrocities of Oct. 7. A winemaker was murdered, his partners kidnapped, a winery destroyed, some wineries lost family members, some vineyards were burnt, others abandoned. Each fall of a rocket or debris within a vineyard causes damage to vines and expensive trellising systems in a 10x10 meter radius.

Wineries have had to operate on an emergency footing. Visitors' centers were closed, and sales were lost. Some employees were absent, being repeatedly on reserve duty during the year; others were evacuated and are living like refugees in their own country. In the first three months of the war, there was a drastic loss of sales, particularly in restaurants.

Though this sector has recovered, the loss of income

is never made up. Nevertheless, the wineries of the Galilee and the Golan have continued to grow vineyards and make wine, without consideration for their safety. Their bravery, determination, and professionalism have ensured that wine will be produced from the 2024 harvest.

The bombing of the North started in 2023 before some wineries had completed the harvest of their red grapes, continued through the crucial pruning period in January and February 2024, and by the time the 2024 harvest came around, Hezbollah was still targeting the North. It is important to note there was no war with Hamas on Oct. 6 and no war with Hezbollah on Oct. 7. One should question whether the jingoism of these two terrorist organizations has achieved anything. Hamas, which governs Gaza, and Hezbollah, which is firmly enmeshed in the government of Lebanon, have scarcely done their own people a favor by declaring war on Israel.

The war was at their initiation. It was their choice. What exactly have they achieved for the Palestinians and the Lebanese?

It is true the Lebanese wineries have had more than their share of wars and violence. However, I think it is pretty unique that a wine region has been targeted like this for more than 12 months. The Galilee and the Golan Heights are still under attack. Remember that this is 40% of Israeli wine. The eco-terrorism has been severe. Hundreds and thousands of dunams have been destroyed. Forests and nature reserves have been burnt to a cinder, wild animals killed, and all agriculture seriously disrupted. And that is before we get to the property destroyed and lives lost.

I DECIDED to speak to four players bearing the brunt of the attacks. All are situated in the Upper Galilee. I spoke to Alex Haruni, owner of Dalton Winery; Kobi Arviv, head winemaker of Recanati Winery; Dana Sharon, marketing manager of Galil Mountain Winery; and Yitzik Cohen, grower-winemaker and owner of Ramot Naftaly Winery.

Dalton Winery is the pioneer of the Galilee. It was founded in 1995 by the Harunis, a British-Israeli family. That was nearly 30 years ago. It is situated in the Dalton Industrial Estate in the Upper Galilee. Alex Haruni manages in a quiet, steady, considered way without undue fuss, noise, or marketing gimmicks. He is smart and thoughtful in all he does, and Dalton is a winery that offers quality, innovation, and consistency.

After the first few weeks of the war, Haruni told me, they decided to find a way of continuing to work. The experience of navigating the winery during COVID helped; however, the worst thing was the feeling of uncertainty. It is tough to run a business when the safety of your employees is at risk. Dalton Winery bought flak jackets and helmets for the staff and installed a portable shelter so that everyone was only minutes away from safety when the sirens would go off, signifying another barrage of rockets.

They had to ensure that the tanks were full and the barrels topped up to be prepared for enforced absences. They moved their inventory of wine to the center of the country, to safeguard the stock and to ensure that they could have access to it when they wanted. Lack of staff was a problem. Some were called up, others evacuated; so, for example, they had to bring in contractors to do the bottling.

With regard to vineyards, they had to let go of the fruit of 100 dunams because the vineyards were too dangerous to approach. There was also a loss of fruit because of rocket fall and fire. There was no tourism, so the visitors' center was closed. That is a considerable loss of income for a large winery. So they have had to be creative to reach their customers in the center of the country. This they have done by participating in farmers' markets and having open days using other wineries as venues. For instance, Dalton was hosted in turn by Sphera Winery and Domaine du Castel for tasting events.

Restaurants have returned to normal, as anyone trying to book a table in Tel Aviv can attest. In a sense,





Tel Avivians eat, drink, and are merry, while the North is burning. It is not callous, but an important message: Life goes on. Haruni intimated there has been a slowdown in retail but a pickup in supermarkets. The 2024 harvest season was compressed and shorter than usual, increasing the workload and pressure, but also dangerous. They were grateful for the support of Druze pickers, with whom they have worked for years. There was great relief when the harvest was finally successfully completed.

RECANATI WINERY moved up to the North only a couple of years ago. It built a beautifully designed winery and is now the largest winery in the Galilee. The winery is most known for focusing on Mediterranean varieties, making a statement that these are more suitable for our Levantine climate. Kobi Arviv is a talented winemaker. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. A great deal of credit for Recanati's good name is due to him.

He talked about the problem of vineyard workers. A previous source of Palestinian and Thai workers has dried up. They have lost 60 dunams of vineyards because of closed military zones being declared. The grapes simply go to waste. One of Recanati's leading vineyards was damaged by tanks passing by. They damaged the fence; and animals, such as wild boar, had a tea party, eating some of the most valuable grapes of their flagship wine.

Quite apart from anything else is the safety aspect. Arviv drives north to the winery as do a few of the workers who used to work at their previous Emek Hefer site. This drive is scary, fraught with danger, as is driving to and from the vineyards. The attacks are frequent and come without warning. Finally, Recanati has a grand new visitors' center, which it has scarcely been able to operate yet.



Galil Mountain Winery is situated on the border at Yiron, overlooked by Hezbollah outposts. They are pioneering leaders of the move to sustainability in Israel and, unlike the other large wineries, focus only on the terroir of the Upper Galilee. All their fruit comes from there.

Dana Sharon is bubbly, dynamic, and overflowing with ideas and energy. She explained that the winery is only 700 meters from the border. It was a tremendous feat to finish the harvest, and she went out of her way to praise the growers, winemakers, and harvest team. She said that completing the harvest this year was a miracle. Many of the employees have been evacuated for more than a year. Some young families are living in one room in a hotel in intolerable circumstances.

Yet, they continue to work. Like at Dalton, the winery was closed, so they have had to be creative in initiating events outside. One was an innovative pop-up bar-restaurant in Nahalat Binyamin in Tel Aviv. They also held an open house tasting shared with Domaine du Castel and were hosted at its winery in the Judean Hills. Galil Mountain has lost 300 dunams of vineyards due to fires.

On a positive note, Sharon said there has been a distinct increase in sales of gift packs as companies buying presents rally to support wineries of the North.

Yitzhak Cohen, owner of Ramot Naftaly, was the first who showed the true potential of the Upper Galilee in terms of quality as a grower. His is a small boutique winery, but he was a pioneer of previously unfashionable varietals such as Barbera, Malbec, and Petit Ver-



**HARVESTING, LITERALLY under fire.**  
(Dalton Winery)

**WAR & WINE: Army tanks parked at Dalton Winery.** (Dalton Winery)

**RECEIVING GRAPES at Galil Mountain Winery, overlooked by Lebanon.**  
(Galil Mountain Winery)

**WATCHING ROCKET fire uncomfortably overhead at Recanati Winery.** (Recanati Winery)

dot. Cohen also moved his inventory to the center of the country so it was safe and accessible. He lost some fruit due to the heat of a fire next to the vineyard. The leaves and grapes simply withered.

He continues to live in an area under fire all the time. He walks for exercise just to get out of the house. It is immediately noticeable that the place is empty apart from the military. There are no people and no dogs. The area nearest the border has simply been evacuated. The borders of Israel have shrunk. He finds it very depressing.

His winery is also closed, and as a small winery, a massive 40% of his sales are usually from sales in the winery shop. They have reacted to this by creating an online sales platform and arranging new distribution in areas they did not normally sell to previously.

ALL FOUR of these heroes are determined to continue to produce wine to gladden the hearts of man. Each in turn praised the spirit of their colleagues, and they were overcome by the sheer outpourings of support by Israelis from every walk of life. As a result, they don't feel alone.

The first thought of every wine lover should be to support wines from the Galilee and the Golan next time you are buying. As for those abroad, every wine you buy makes a difference. By deciding to buy Israeli wine, you are putting Israel up front; but if your selection is from the North of Israel, your purchase especially counts.

If all is relaxed in London, Paris, and New York, and the attacks on Tel Aviv are comparatively sporadic, let's all not forget what the wineries of northern Israel are going through on a daily basis without respite. It is 12 months since the Simchat Torah massacre. Twelve months since the beginning of the Oct. 7 war with Hamas, and for 12 months the Galilee and the Golan have been under constant attack from Hezbollah. ■

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