



VITKIN WINERY offers a busy, hospitable visitors' center with farm-to-table food and wine. (Ron Hayoun)

A FAMILY JOURNEY



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Israel's wine history may be distilled into a few significant events. The reappearance of wine in the Holy Land and the resettlement of Jerusalem may be symbolized by the establishment of Zion Winery by the Shor family in the Old City in 1848. They used indigenous grape varieties grown by Arabs in Hebron.

The revival of an Israeli wine industry after 2,000 years coincided with the First Aliyah. It may be dated from 1882 with the founding of Carmel by Baron Edmond de Rothschild using French expertise. The dominant grape varieties were Alicante and Carignan, but the wines were simple and inexpensive.

The quality revolution and the introduction of New World technology, together with the import of Californian expertise, came with the founding of the Golan Heights Winery in 1983.

The boutique wine revolution took off in the 1990s, with wineries like Margalit Winery, Domaine du Castel, and Tzora Vineyards leading the way. At the time, the big four grape varieties that dominated quality wines were Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay. Most of the wines were varietals, being named after the dominant variety.

The ABC revolution (Anything But Cabernet or Chardonnay), giving life to other lesser-known varieties, began with the founding of a small winery situated in the Sharon Plain, called Vitkin Winery. It was founded in 2001 by two brothers-in-law, Doron

Belogolovsky and Assaf Paz. Belogolovsky is descended from the founders of Kfar Vitkin. His great-grandparents Miriam and Mordechai Ruttenberg settled in the village in 1932, determined to contribute to the agriculture of the new country.

This connection gave the winery a sense of place. It was originally situated on the family farm. Doron Belogolovsky is a master craftsman who used to work with stone and marble, which entailed frequently traveling and staying in Italy. There, he came in contact with wine and learned to love and appreciate fermented grape juice. The winery began modestly, and he became a self-taught winemaker.

Assaf Paz was a pastry chef who studied food engineering. Initially he became interested in, and then infatuated with, wine. He was the first Israeli to



WINERY FOUNDERS: Brothers-in-law Doron Belogolovsky and Assaf Paz (2001).



SIBLING PARTNERS in Vitkin: Assaf Paz, the winemaker; and Sharona Belogolovsky, the CEO. (Photos: Vitkin Winery)

study in Bordeaux, France, where he graduated. He gained work experience in Bordeaux (with Château Pontet Canet), in California (with Navarro Vineyards), and in Australia. Over the next decade, Paz's day job was making wine in large wineries. He worked for Tishbi, Carmel's Zichron Ya'acov Cellars, Binyamina, and for a short time at Segal (of Barkan-Segal).

Owing to this, he swiftly gained experience, continued his learning curve, and had the opportunity to work with vineyards all Israel. He left a mark and received plaudits for his direction and his wines. It was like fast-forwarding his wine education, and it made him super equipped to steer the wine direction of the family winery, which he did together with Belogolovsky.

I first came across Paz when he was studying in Bordeaux. He contacted me to ask for samples for a wine tasting of Israeli wines. I initially thought, "Who is this asking for free wine?" In time, I learned it was for a good cause, and I hope I dealt with his request respectfully. Later, I visited the winery in the *garagiste* days, and it was spotless; always a good sign.

Later on, we worked together at Carmel, so I feel I know him quite well. No doubt, Paz is one of our finest winemakers and brightest talents. He makes wine with a smiling chutzpah. He has the precision and pursuit of perfection of the pastry chef he once was, which he allies to an artful creativeness and a desire to think differently. He always has the look of the naughty boy at school, with a ready smile and a mischievous glint in his eye, and is a bouncy, irrepressible character.

In 2003 Belogolovsky's wife, who is Paz's sister, joined the men to steer the boat as CEO. Now, a good manager wants to be known for her ability, not her gender. However, one can't avoid the fact that Sharona Belogolovsky is the most prominent and long-lasting female CEO of an Israeli winery. But she was not the first. Rosa Shor became the manager of Zion Winery when her husband passed away before his time nearly 100 years ago. In the more recent past, Ronit Badler of Galil Mountain Winery was the first modern-time woman CEO. Some of the largest wineries in the country have also had women at the helm. Anat Rushansky was CEO of the Golan Heights Winery for nine years, and Dalia Mandelman was CEO of Carmel Winery, though she did not last for much more than a year. However, Sharona has lasted the test of time.

She is an architect by profession and mother of three. She is a very good manager, with the ability to see the full picture. She has a laser-like focus on what is important and is also gifted with a clear vision of where the winery is going. Managing a family business is never simple, but she is able to filter out the noise and can focus on the necessary decisions for benefit over the long term. This is a rare quality for winery managers, who sometimes can't see beyond the current promotion. She is talented, a great boon to the winery, and, to be honest, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Just look at what she has achieved and where the winery is today.

From the very beginning, Vitkin Winery decided to make red wines from what were then unfashionable varieties such as Cabernet Franc, Carignan, Pinot Noir, and Petite Sirah. For whites, they used Gewurztraminer and Riesling. With each of these varieties, they were either the pioneers or in the first group (usually with Margalit and Golan Heights Wineries) to make quality wines from them. Therefore, Vitkin Winery began its way, with innovation and a drive for quality.

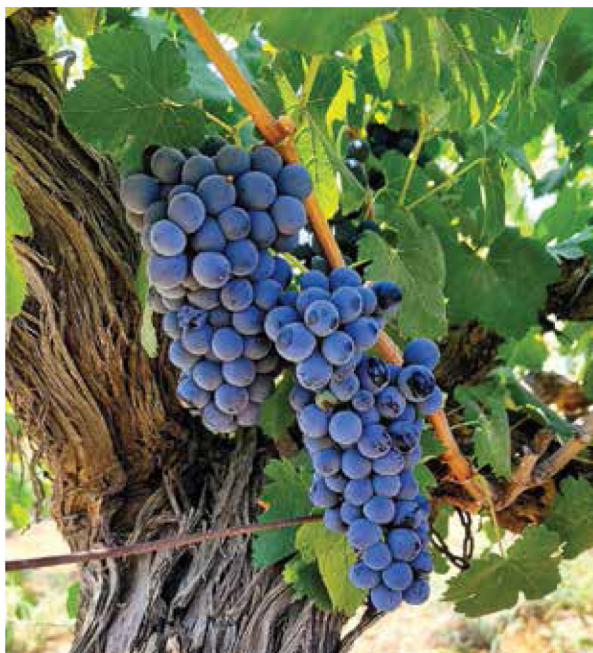
It was the Carignan that made Vitkin Winery's name. Until then, for over 100 years it was the workhorse grape of Israel and was used to make bland, inexpensive wines or liquid religion (grape juice and *Kiddush* wine). When Paz visited an underperforming, over-producing old vine Carignan vineyard, he saw potential for quality. He had his own vision with his



newly gained knowledge and a natural curiosity, reinforced by a life-changing visit to the Priorat wine region in Spain, where Mediterranean varieties are at home. By coaxing the grower to change the habits of a lifetime and drastically lowering yields, he was able to make a beautiful, characterful fine wine. Within this success was the subtext message to his colleagues: Mediterranean varieties grow better in a hot climate, which includes an Eastern Mediterranean country like Israel, and these varieties can give a more authentic Israeli expression. Thus Assaf Paz became the father of quality Carignan in Israel... and Petite Sirah, for that matter.

In 2015, Vitkin went up a class. The winery moved to larger premises and became kosher. Sharona, the architect, designed the winery, converting a chicken coop into a winery and visitors' center. Belogolovsky, the craftsman, installed the winery equipment and fixtures and fittings of the winery. The late Avraham Paz, father of Sharona and Assaf, was a talented carpenter, and he and Belogolovsky built much of the furniture that can be seen in the visitors' center. Vitkin remains the ultimate artisan family winery. The winery bric-à-brac, furniture, and surrounding photos all provide memorabilia of both family and place. Everything you see or touch has a meaning and history. It gives the feeling of a home within a winery.

The visitors' center has a homey, relaxed but buzzing atmosphere. There is an outside deck alongside an ex-



BEAUTIFUL THICK, old gnarled vine of Petite Sirah from the Judean Foothills.



VITKIN VINTAGES: Pioneers in the ABC movement and leaders in advancing Mediterranean varieties. (Shelly Peeri)

VITKIN GRENACHE, one of the best of the new wave of summer reds.

perimental vineyard when the weather allows. There is a private room for tutored tastings or for corporate use. Food is homemade, farm to table, some vegetables being grown by the winery, and is quite frankly delicious. The winery is so easily accessible from the center of the country, that it has become a must-visit destination for wine lovers. It is situated in a beautiful area, surrounded by orchards, and is close to the Alexander Stream Nature Reserve and the Turtle Bridge. It is a good area for a hike, followed by a glass of wine and some food. Vitkin Winery is a perfect place to meet or be seen, and to eat, drink, and be merry!

The winery cherry-picks grapes from the best wine regions for each variety. They source fruit from the Coastal Plain, Judean Foothills, Upper Galilee, and Golan Heights. The Carignan comes from Alona near Binyamina, and the Riesling and Petite Sirah are grown in Givat Yeshayahu. There are three basic labels. Israeli Journey is their entry-level, with fresh, vibrant red, white, and rosé blends. These are great value quaffable wines. They may often be found as "Wines by the Glass" in restaurants.

The label known as Vitkin is the meat of the winery. This is a label of varietals. The winery was the first to make quality Carignan, Petite Sirah, Riesling, and Grenache Blanc on a regular basis, and one of the first to make a varietal Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir, and a dry Gewurztraminer.

The Carignan is the wine they are most known for. It is rich, complex, leathery, with a long, lingering finish. The Grenache Noir is light and has bright crunchy fruit, a fruit-led flavor, and a refreshing acidity. It is a super summer or lunchtime wine. I love it!

The prestige wine is called Shorashim, which translates as "roots." This expression is sumptuous and complex with a good ability to age. It is recommended to buy it and put it away in your cellar and forget about it for a few years.

Vitkin Winery is one of Israel's finest small wineries. Different wine lovers, connoisseurs, wine critics, and experts will all have their favorite Vitkin wine, but they will differ according to personal taste. However, every wine is made to high standards of quality. There are no backward strugglers in the portfolio. If the winery suffers, it is because many still want everything to be Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, or Chardonnay. And the kosher export world it still wedded to Cabernet Sauvignon.

However, Vitkin Winery forged a new path and took many of the Israeli wine producers with them. They created change and still inspire their peers with their innovative winemaking.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should point out that my daughter works at this winery, but that does not mean what I write is not a fair representation. This is a winery on a family journey. They should be praised for their path and success. Just think where they were 20 years ago and how far they may reach in the next 20 years. ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 38 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com