




THE RECANATI Winery has opened its new visitors' center, which has a wonderful view. (Recanati Winery)



MOST GALILEE winery visitors' centers offer food, as well as wine. (Galil Mountain)

GO NORTH



• BY ADAM MONTEFIORE

The north of Israel has been bereft of wine tourism for over a year. Tourists stopped coming, winery visitors' centers were closed and residents were evacuated. Now is the time to go north again and support our wineries, particularly in the Galilee.



THE BARREL cellar is always worth a visit at any winery. (Galil Mountain)



THE VINEYARDS in the Galilee are some of the most beautiful in the country. (Galil Mountain)

Bordering on Lebanon, the Galilee is arguably Israel's most famous wine region. Today more wines are exported from the "Galilee wine region" than any other region. Furthermore, because of political issues, wines grown on the Golan Heights also carry the Galilee appellation.

However, the region is important for so much more than just wine. The Galilee is the cradle of Christianity, a center for Jewish spirituality, and many Israeli Arabs call it home. It is therefore perhaps the best example of the melting pot that constitutes modern Israel.

Associating the Galilee with wine is not new. Those who have any doubts only need to read the Bible. Go back in time 2,000 years, even 4,000 years ago, and wine was being made in the same Galilee! There was a time when the Canaanites made the best wines in the world. Their wines were consumed in great quantities and exported all over the Near East. They were particularly favored by the pharaohs of Egypt.

One of the most exciting archaeological finds in recent years was a Canaanite palace at Tel Kabri, which housed the largest Canaanite wine cellar yet discovered. Estimates say this site dates back to 3,800 years ago.

The Canaanite wine culture was passed on or absorbed by the Israelites, and as a result, this land and its wine became part of the narrative of both the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. Tel Kabri is situated in the Galilee, which reinforces the march of history. Then as now, Galilean wine was part of the supporting cast.

A couple of thousand years later, the first miracle

of a young man from Nazareth was changing water into wine at a wedding in Kfar Cana. Experts believe it was white wine, because according to the narrative, it looked like water. Today's Kfar Kanna is also in the Galilee. Imagine the wheels of history as you enjoy a Sauvignon Blanc or Chardonnay from Galilee vineyards, as you contemplate Jesus' first miracle!

THE REGION is made up of the high elevation Upper Galilee and the Lower Galilee. To be more specific, it is the Eastern Upper Galilee that is the heartbeat of Galilean wine. The vineyards of the region cover the land like a patchwork, but the aspect of each is different. Some are on slopes, others in valleys, but all are in surroundings resplendent with beautiful views. The dedicated wine lover will bask in the opportunities this area provides.

The Western Upper Galilee, not far from Karmiel, hosts fewer pioneering wineries. In this area it is the olive groves, not vineyards, that cover the region, and it is the place to buy your local olive oil. The Lower Galilee is not so prolific with wineries or vineyards, though some near Kfar Tavor are pretty well established and have been there a while. The Jezreel Valley, adjacent to the Lower Galilee, has its own wineries and vineyards.

Therefore, the wine lover has the options of three distinct wine routes within the wider region: the Eastern Upper Galilee, the Western Upper Galilee and



GALIL MOUNTAIN Winery is situated on the northern border with Lebanon at Yiron. (Galil Mountain)

the Lower Galilee combined with the Jezreel Valley. Israeli wine moved to the Galilee because of the superior terroir and higher elevation. In a hot country, the altitude is important. Some vineyards in the Eastern Upper Galilee are more than 800 meters (approx. 2,600 ft.) above sea level. The vineyards in the Western Upper Galilee are 650 meters (about 2,100 ft.) high. There tends to be a mosaic of soils, sometimes even in the same vineyard. Terra Rossa, limestone with volcanic soil and gravel, are common features.



The Galilee is arguably Israel's most strikingly beautiful wine region. It is an area of mountain peaks, stony ridges, deep valleys and gorges, running streams and dense forests. The views can be breathtaking. This makes it a good place for a hike, a trek or a picnic. The beauty of wine tourism is that you don't always need to visit a winery – sometimes a picnic with the right bottle and good company will suffice!

The prominence of Galilee wine in modern times is relatively new, though there were some early signs. Kerem Ben Zimra, Ramat Naftali and Kfar Tabor were places where earlier vineyards were planted. Two milestone wines both came from Galilee vineyards.

THE CARMEL Special Reserve 1979, one of the first international style wines produced in Israel, and the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1984, the first major award winner, came mainly from vineyards in the Galilee. This gave an early glimpse into the potential of the region. Dalton Winery was founded by the Haruni family in 1995. They were the pioneers of the Galilee.

In the mid to late '90s, the planting of new vineyards took off, particularly at higher elevations. The trend took off when some of the largest wineries situated in the center of the country, like Carmel and Barkan, planted their best quality vineyards in the Galilee. They produced wines from all over, but their single vineyard and prestige wines were from the Galilee. They took care to put this fact prominently on the labels, because of the added value it gave.

Also, Margalit Winery, the first quality boutique winery, grew their early wines, which made their name, at Kadita in the Upper Galilee. Tabor Winery was founded by local growers in 1999 and Galil Mountain Winery was established in 2000 by the Golan Heights Winery. Thus, the image of the region quickly improved in the eyes of wine lovers, connoisseurs and, most importantly, the wine professionals.

The number of Galilean wineries grew considerably after the turn of the millennium. Who could forget the wines from Carmel's Kayoumi Vineyard, which for the first 10 to 15 years of the new millennium, was arguably the most famous vineyard in Israel? Award winning Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and a unique Riesling came from this special vineyard. This was before the dreaded virus struck.

Wineries tend to be in clusters. The canny tourist will plan ahead by checking where the wineries reside. For instance, the Ramat Dalton, Mount Meron and Kedesh Valley areas are awash with them. On the Ramat Dalton Industrial Estate, there are wineries such as Adir, Dalton, Feldstein, Kamisa (previously



SOME OF the employees of Dalton Winery at the beginning of the war. (Dalton Winery)

SOON THE vineyards will be covered with wildflowers. (Tabor Winery)

ALEX HARUNI, owner of Dalton Winery, which is now 30 years old. Pioneers of the Galilee. (David Silverman)



Delta), Lueria, Recanati and Rimon – and more have committed to move there in the next few years. It will become the center of Galilee winemaking and wine tourism.

Nearby, in the foothills of Mount Meron are Ben Zimra, Jascala, Or Haganuz and Shvo wineries. Kedesh Valley is host to Amram, Naaman, Ramat Naftali and 3 Vines wineries, which are not so far from Galil Mountain at Yiron. In the Western Upper Galilee there are the Ashkar, Kishor and Stern wineries. In the Lower Galilee and Jezreel Valley are Carmel at Alon Tabor, Jezreel Valley, Kitron, Lotem, Netofa and Tulip wineries.

FOUR OF the ten largest wineries in the country are situated in the Galilee: Dalton, Galil Mountain, Recanati and Tabor.

Dalton, which is approaching its thirtieth anniversary, is a winery with great variety and a spirit of invention that has a recent record of thinking out of the box.

Galil Mountain is the only one of the large wineries focusing only on fruit from the Upper Galilee and is a leader of "sustainability" in Israel, both in vineyard and winery.

Recanati has recently arrived in the North and is now the largest winery in the Upper Galilee, specializing in Mediterranean grape varieties.

Tabor is the largest winery in the Galilee. Their focus is on what they call "ecological vineyards," bringing life and diversity back into wine growing. All four wineries have growing production and each has gained impressive international recognition.

Of course, when talking size, the largest winery of all in the North will be Carmel Winery at Alon Tabor in the Jezreel Valley. Plans are for this to become Carmel's main winery in the future.

If we are talking about variety, Galilee wineries cover the full spectrum. Kishor and Tulip both support and

are part of communities of adults with special needs. Or Haganuz and Kamisa are successful initiatives of ultra-Orthodox communities and individuals. Ashkar and Jascala are truly fine wineries owned by Israeli Arab families.

Jezreel Valley Winery specializes in the Israeli variety Argaman, as well as Israel's adopted heritage variety Carignan. Lueria is a winery created on the basis of a long-established vineyard. Rimon makes wine from pomegranates. Ramot Naftaly specializes in rarer varieties like Barbera and Petit Verdot, and has recently produced a traditional-method sparkling wine.

The owner of Naaman Winery is a script writer and film director. His love of art and music shows through in his labels, wine names and wines.

Many visitors' centers have special features. Recanati and Lotem have wonderful views, Netofa has a very plush tasting room, Kitron is an extravagant gravity winery and Adir houses a winery and dairy on the same site. The farm to table brunch at Galil Mountain is recommended, Kishor offers produce made and grown on site and Stern is a winery that often hosts wine and food events.

Two of our finest and most individualistic winemakers, Gaby Sadan of Shvo Vineyards and Avi Feldstein of Feldstein Winery, are situated in the Galilee; Lahat Winery also grows its fruit in the Galilee. Here, I have only scratched the surface. In truth, the offerings of each individual winery are far greater, and there are many more good wineries I have not even mentioned.

FOR THOSE who want to intersperse winery visits with gourmet destinations, there are micro-breweries, craft distillers, artisan bakeries, boutique cheese dairies, local honey producers and olive presses. A gourmet tour of the Galilee is as easy to arrange as opening your eyes with the right guidebook in front of you. Failing that, there is the best guide book of all: the internet!

Of course, the Galilee is teeming with restaurants, some small and homey, others genuine chef restaurants. Many will make a point of only using fruit, vegetables, herbs and spices from the region. The Galilee is a haven for ethnic restaurants. Arab, Druse, Circassian cuisines are there to be found, each offering quality and authenticity.

Places like Acre and Nazareth are famous for the food (and a culinary tour of either is recommended), but many of the best restaurants are found in unusual places. They may seem unsophisticated at first glance, but you will find warmth, authenticity, originality, and quality in these eateries. They are the essence of the Galilee, so take the time to look around and observe. Sniff the wind, check out the options, and you will be amazed at how easily it is to be pleasantly surprised.

Whilst you enjoy the Galilee and sample its riches, never forget that the Galilee of Israel today is a mere moment in a long ancient history. Here you are really walking the land of your forefathers and drinking of their fruit. The hills are alive – and this is the time for a special visit to offer your support. ■

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