



A SPARKLE in a glass brings people together.
(Lihi Wolff)

AN ARTISAN traditional method sparkling wine
by Razi'el Winery. (Razi'el Winery)



LOVE IN A GLASS



• ADAM S. MONTEFIORE

Valentine's Day is a time of romance. Roses and chocolates can do the job by conveying a message, but sparkling wine is not far behind. The roses and chocolates are gifts wrapped in feelings. You give them as a gesture of your love; but a sparkling wine, you open and drink together, sharing your love in a glass.

Sparkling wine is certainly the wine of fashion, partying, celebration, and romance. It remains the classic wine to make a toast with. It is also a symbol of success, happiness, and love. Though it is a style of wine that has taken Israelis time to learn to appreciate, sparkling wines have become very popular here; even so, fads fluctuate.

A few years ago, Spanish Cava was all the rage, and the word "cava" became the slang for any wine with bubbles. Then it was Italian Prosecco that became popular. Now the discerning drinker is looking for something else, and Crémants from different regions of France are creating interest.

Champagne is the ultimate expression of the art, which is replicated by "traditional method" sparkling wines made elsewhere. It is little known, but between the late 1950s and 1980s, the Carmel winery produced genuine *méthode champenoise* (aka the classic or traditional method) sparkling wines.

It was an expensive undertaking needing a special workforce, as everything was done by hand. There was no market for expensive sparkling wine in those days, and so they eventually stopped production. It was too unprofitable. The only remaining clue of a champagne past were the old pupitres (wine racks for riddling), which could be seen at the Rishon Le Zion Cellars until Carmel vacated the premises.

However, it was not until the 1990s that Israel took

a giant step forward in producing quality sparkling wine. The Golan Heights Winery, showing the seriousness and professionalism that set them apart, sent their new winemaker, then a youngster named Victor Schoenfeld, to work for six months at Jacquesson Champagne to learn the secrets of the *champenoise*.

The Golan then invested in all the modern equipment to make traditional method sparkling wine. This time the process was mechanized, and gyropallets were used instead of manual remuage.

At the 1996 International Wine and Spirit Competition in London, Israeli sparkling wine arrived on the international stage. Yarden Blanc de Blancs, then a non-vintage wine, won the trophy for The Best Bottle Fermented Sparkling Wine. I was there at the Guildhall in London in a rented dinner jacket and bow tie

at the prestigious gala dinner when the trophies were presented.

It was a seminal moment because it was international recognition for Israel but also illustrated that Golan Heights Winery's approach of investing in quality and not cutting corners paid off big time. This high-profile award was repeated in 2003 when Yarden Blanc de Blancs 1997, by then a vintage wine, won the same trophy.

The 1999 vintage also won a prestigious trophy at Vinitaly in 2006. These prizes were to the immense credit of the Golan Heights Winery and clearly showed that Israeli sparkling wines were world-class.

Now fast forward to the early 2020s, and there has been a mini boom of traditionally made sparkling wines made in small or even tiny quantities. This



YARDEN ROSE Brut is a high-quality sparkling wine from the Golan Heights Winery. (Adi Perse)



VALENTINE'S VINTAGES (from L): Private Collection Pink Moscato; Marcel Cabelier Cremant de Jura; Gamla Brut; Bottega Rosé Prosecco; Fizzaro Rosé.

(Private Collection: Eyal Keren; Others: Wineries mentioned)

was led by Razi'el Winery, founded by the Ben-Zaken family, also owners of Domaine du Castel. No doubt, the Golan Heights Winery is one of the most advanced wineries in the world, with technology as up to date as tomorrow in its vineyards and winery.

Razi'el has a different approach. There is a boutique, hands-on winery. They have fashioned a handmade, artisan expression of sparkling wine, also made strictly in the same way as Champagne. They were preceded by Pelter, who first made their sparkling wine a few years ago, and followed by other wineries such as Dalton, Eilah Valley, Psagot, Ramat Naftaly, and Sphera, and no doubt there are others.

However, handcrafted sparkling wine is arguably best represented by Razi'el, and perfectionist Francophile, Eli Ben-Zaken. Over the years, wineries like Carmel, Tabor, Teperberg, and Tishbi have all dabbled in sparkling wines, but the Israeli public either wants the real thing, Champagne, a known brand from abroad, like Cava or Prosecco, or the cheapest fizz possible. Particularly popular in that category are Lambrusco and Moscato.

Sparkling wines generally fit into three categories. The finest Israeli sparkling wines are made like Champagne, by the traditional or classic method. With these wines, the secondary fermentation takes place in the same bottle in which the wine is eventually sold. The mid-priced sparkling wines are often produced by the Cuve Close or Charmat process.

The secondary fermentation takes place in a tank, and they are then bottled under pressure to preserve the bubbles. Then there are the basic carbonated wines, made as some cynics say by the Coca-Cola method. To these may be added variations like the lightly sparkling Moscato and the naturally produced Pet-Nats, which may also be described, tongue in cheek, as hipster's champagnes.

Opening a bottle of sparkling wine is dangerous. The pressure in a bottle is similar to the pressure in the tire of a double-decker bus. The cork also is a projectile that can fit into the eye socket and do untold damage. So take heed and beware. Hold the bottle at 45° and be sure it is not pointing at anyone (even someone you don't like).

Gently undo the wire surrounding the cork, keeping a finger on top of the cork. Hold the cork, and gently turn the bottle. Control the effect of the pressure so it comes out with an erotic sigh rather than an uncontrolled pop.

Once we insisted on using only flute or tulip glasses to preserve the bubbles. Now we are less strict, and a regular white wine glass is considered more than adequate, providing a better stage for the aromas. Pour gently and steadily, with the glass on a slant so it does not froth over. Just avoid the flat, coupe glasses, which were shaped to fit Marie Antoinette's breast. Such glasses are more suitable for cocktails or ice cream.

Sparkling wines are traditionally served as an aper-

tif. The French serve it bone dry and young, with the pronounced acidity at its fiercest. The Brits, the world's largest consumers of Champagne, serve it with a little more bottle age to bring out the complexity. It's often their preferred choice at the end of a banquet after many courses and wines.

A brut champagne is a clean, refreshing way to finish an evening. Sparkling wines go with anything that goes with white wines or rosés. There is a great variety of Israeli and imported sparkling wines, and they are perfect for Valentine's Day. It does not have to be real Champagne or the most expensive (though it won't do any harm!).

The most practical option is to choose one that both you and your partner will like...and if that is Lambrusco or Moscato, that is the right choice for you. Rosé is not essential for Valentine's Day, as any sparkling wine has a cachet, but the color pink does massage the instinct of romance. Whatever the question, fizz or pink fizz is the answer.

Some recommendations for Valentine's Day are as follows:

Razi'el Brut Rosé NV

A beautifully crafted traditional sparkling wine, which was fermented in 600-liter demi-muids oak barrels, and then aged *sur lies* for six months. It has a beautiful, seductive salmon pink color with delicate fruit, complex aromas, and a fine, refreshing acidity. It is a beautiful expression of the craftsmen's approach and a wonderful addition to Israel's sparkling wine portfolio. NIS 249

Yarden Rosé Brut 2018

Made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes grown in the northern Golan. Very pale colored, the wine rested no less than five years on its tirage yeast. It has a delicate nose of lemon zest and strawberry with hints of freshly baked brioche. It also has good complexity, length of flavors, and a well-defined finish. Beautiful Israeli sparkling wine, as good as any Champagne. NIS 150

Gamla Brut NV

Made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes, strictly using the traditional method of secondary fermentation in the bottle. The wine then rested 12 months in the bottle on its tirage yeasts. It has refreshing aromas of lime and citrus, with a pronounced acidity and a clean finish. Represents great value. NIS 75.

Bottega Rosé Gold 2022

Prosecco is the Italian sparkling wine that took the world by storm. The bottle is a striking color, with a "B" embossed on it. The wine is made mainly from Pinot Nero (better known as Pinot Noir) grapes grown in the Lombardy region. It is fragrant with fruit and floral notes, is light-bodied, harmonious, and, though dry, has an impression of a touch of fruity sweetness. Bottega is a many-generations family of distillers and winemakers. NIS 120

Psagot Rosie 2022

An innovative wine produced from Chardonnay and Merlot grapes that has undergone a fast-track traditional method process. The wine is refreshing and uplifting, with notes of strawberry and flowers. Casual and easygoing. A fun expression made by Psagot, the largest winery in the Central Mountains Region. NIS 99

Marcel Cabelier Cremant du Jura Brut

"Crémant" is the generic word for a traditional method sparkling wine made in France, but outside the area of Champagne. The wines are made in the same way, but they don't have the cachet of Champagne. However, there is variety (many different regions produce their own crémants), great quality, and the value is excellent. This crémant is aged on its lees for a year. It is crisp and refreshing, mainly made from Chardonnay, and has floral and citrus aromas and subtle toasty notes. NIS 90

Maison Castel Crémant de Bordeaux Brut

The wine is made from Sémillon and Cabernet Franc grown in Bordeaux. It is fresh, elegant, and lively, with nice length. Maison Castel is a range of regional wines produced by Castel Frères. The Castel Group, founded in 1949 by Pierre Castel, is a very large beverage company and the largest French wine company. It has no relation or connection to our own Domaine du Castel. NIS 59

Private Collection Pink Moscato 2024

Moscato is still very popular. The kings of Moscato are Carmel, who manufacture it under three different labels: Buzz, Selected, and Private Collection. I am not skilled enough to judge the differences by taste, but the principles of each of their Moscatos are the same.

All the wines are low alcohol, slightly sparkling, aromatic with grapey, fruity flavors, and sweet. Private Collection is one of our more long-lasting labels, being first launched in 1988. Their new Pink Moscato can be drunk at any time and at any place, and is ideal for breakfast or brunch onward. NIS 45

Fizzaro Moscato Rosé

Only 9% alcohol, this is an aromatic, fragrant, semi-dry rosé sparkling wine that has delicate sweetness but also a lively freshness and flavorful finish. It is made in Spain in the La Mancha region and is imported by Zion Winery. NIS 40

Giacobazzi Lambrusco White

A special edition Lambrusco produced by one of the giants from Modena in Italy's Emilia-Romagna region. The wine is light, fruity, and comfortably semi-dry. People who like Lambrusco will like this very much. Certainly, it is a good party wine. NIS 30

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

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