



THE GOLAN HEIGHTS is most well known for its wine and vineyards.  
(Golan Heights Winery)

IN SPRING, the vines will bud, and beautiful wild flowers will grow between the vines.  
(Galil Mountain Winery)

## NEW YEAR FOR VINES



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Israel has a festival for planting trees, which is called Tu Bishvat, which is also known as the New Year for trees.

The term “Tu Bishvat: comes from the Jewish date, meaning the 15th of Shvat, which is the fifth month in the Jewish calendar. It is celebrated by planting trees and has also become a festival with ecological undertones, reminding Israelis and Jews everywhere to care for the environment. Schoolchildren go on tree-planting activities, and people from abroad are encouraged to make a donation for a tree to be planted in Israel in their name.

This respect for trees and the environment has stood Israel well. It is the only country in the world with more trees now than one hundred years ago.

A common question is why Tu Bishvat is celebrated in the depth of winter and not in the spring. The answer is that this date separates one year from the next with regard to growth. This is easiest to understand with regard to the vine. Vineyards are in a dormant period at this time. The inexperienced onlooker will look at a vineyard in winter and assume the vine is dead. However, in practice the vine is gathering strength to bud and bloom in the spring. The ground has absorbed the winter rains, and the sap is rising pre-budding. So think of Tu Bishvat as the agricultural turning point between two years.

The grapevine is something between a shrub and a tree. The vine is one of the main symbols of Israel, from the time the spies in the Bible went to Moses carrying a large bunch of grapes, saying, “It is a land of milk and honey, and this is the fruit.” In *Deuteronomy*, it is written that the Land of Israel is “a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey.” These became the seven blessed species of Israel. They were well chosen. Each grows well in our climate and requires less water than many other fruit trees.

There are areas of Israel where the planting of vine-

yards staked out the land. The most obvious example is from 1882 when Baron Edmond de Rothschild invested in founding a modern Israeli wine industry. He sponsored farmers of the First Aliyah to plant vineyards in the valleys surrounding the southern slopes of Mount Carmel and in the central coastal plain, southeast of Jaffa and what is now Tel Aviv. There were many crops that were planted. They experimented with every kind of fruit tree and crop, but it was the planting of vineyards that succeeded in the Eastern Mediterranean, Levantine climate. The vineyards became the symbol of the resettlement of Israel.

An example of trees in the wine context is the Yatir Forest. This is the meeting place between the Hebron

Hills, the Negev Desert, and the Judean Desert. First prime minister David Ben-Gurion wanted to stop the advance of the desert and make the desert bloom. It was his idea to plant the forest. The experts told him, in no uncertain terms, that it would not work. The trees would not survive. So Ben-Gurion impatiently said: “Change the experts!” The forest was planted beginning in 1964. Today, it is Israel’s largest planted forest.

Nestling in the forest, at elevations of between 600 and 900 meters above sea level, are the prized vineyards of Yatir Winery, which is in itself situated at Tel Arad in the northeastern Negev. Vineyards for wine grapes were first planted there in 1996/7. Yatir Winery





DOMAINE DU CASTEL'S vineyard at Tzuba is high up in the Judean Hills. (Castel)

YATIR WINERY'S vineyards are at 600-900 meters elevation in the Yatir Forest. (Yatir Winery)

A VINE (bottom) in winter is in its dormancy period. (Gros Winery)

was founded in 2000, and its first wines were launched in 2004. This semi-arid, forest area has proven to be a unique terroir.

Greek historian Thucydides wrote that man became civilized when he planted the vine and olive tree. These have always been the main agriculture in the stony, poor soils of the Eastern Mediterranean, in places where nothing else could grow. The old adage was "Plant fruit trees if you can; but if you can't plant anything, try vines and olive trees."

The best example of this is Domaine du Castel. The owner, Eli Ben-Zaken, wanted to plant fruit trees around his house in Ramat Raziel. There was one area, on the slope from the house down to the chicken coop and stables, where the soil was too shallow and stony. There, he planted vines because he had no alternative. He made his first wine in 1992 because he had the vineyard, but he had not originally planted a vineyard to make wine. The rest is history, and Castel became Israel's most famous small winery.

Another example is on the Golan Heights, where the planting of vineyards not only changed the Golan forever but totally revolutionized the Israeli wine industry. In 1976, the first vineyards were planted on the Golan Heights. This volcanic, high-elevation plateau was a unique terroir, but no one knew it until the Golan Heights Winery combined expertise, technology, and terroir with the desire to make wine of the highest possible quality. It was not long before wine and vineyards became the most visual and successful product of the Golan.

Tu Bishvat is a time for everyone to think and teach about the values of ecology, caring for the environment, and practicing sustainability. There was a time when Israel was way behind the rest of the world in terms of the environment. The Golan Heights Winery was the first to produce an organically grown wine from the 2002 vintage. The Yarden Odem Vineyard Chardonnay won international awards at the very highest level. However, in the last decade Israeli wineries have begun to focus more on sustainability.

The leader in this drive has been the Golan Heights

Winery. The winery did not only talk the talk but walked the walk. They joined the stringent and meticulous internationally praised Lodi Rules Sustainable Winegrowing Program. Lodi Rules promotes the adoption of over 120 sustainability standards that relate to soil management, ecosystem management, water management, pest management, business management, and human resources. Whereas certified organic and biodynamic farming relates to the environment, certified sustainable farming is all-encompassing and relates to the environment, the people, and the business. Each of the standards is measurable and auditable. The certification process is rigorous and is audited by third parties.

As a result of a commitment over a long period of time, the Golan Heights Winery became the first Israeli winery to receive international accreditation for sustainability. At one level, the idea is to improve quality but also, as Victor Schoenfeld, head winemaker, said, "We see ourselves as guardians of a very special place on the planet. We hope to serve as a model for others in the Israeli wine industry." The lesson of sustainability will be taught by teachers to schoolchildren on Tu Bishvat.

The Tu Bishvat festival may be celebrated with a Seder meal, rather like the more well-known Seder night on Passover. Whereas Passover is rigidly followed according to tradition, Tu Bishvat provides an opportunity to be creative. On one level, it is a party to celebrate nature for children. On another, it may be interpreted through Kabbalah to represent different states

of existence, rebirth, creation, and wholeness, and celebrated on an altogether other level.

Like on Passover, four glasses of wine are required, but in this instance it is to celebrate the four seasons. The first glass is a white wine to represent the bleak, dormant time of winter. The second is white wine with a splash of red in it, which represents the awakening of spring. The third is a red wine with a splash of white in it, to represent the blossoming and flowering. The fourth is a red wine to illustrate the fullness, ripeness, and harvest of the late summer, early autumn.

The best wines to use are the entry-level wines of the large wineries. For example, Carmel Selected, Barkan Classic, Teperberg Vision, Golan Heights Hermon, and Zion Impression. You only need a white and a red wine, which you can mix and blend as required.

As Tu Bishvat is primarily an educational process for children, you may choose to use grape juice. A red and a white grape juice from Arza, Carmel, Jerusalem, Teperberg, or Zion wineries is all you need. The second and third glasses are made by simply making a blend of the red and white accordingly; approximately 2/3 white and 1/3 red for the second glass, and the opposite measurements for the third glass.

Another alternative is to purchase low-alcohol, slightly sparkling Moscato style wines, which are suitable for families. Zion and Teperberg have Red and White Moscatos. The Red Moscatos are made from Muscat Hamburg grapes, and the white is from Muscat of Alexandria.

These glasses of wine are accompanied by fruits of the Land of Israel. With the first glass, a fruit is served that is hard on the outside and soft on the inside. Examples include walnuts or almonds, but citrus, melon, and bananas will also suffice. The next category of fruit with the second glass is soft with a pip in the center, like plums and apricots. The third category of fruit is soft throughout and fully edible, such as strawberries and raspberries. Finally, one should focus on the Seven Species, which include grapes or raisins, dates, pomegranates, and figs. Each grouping has its own symbolic value and meaning.

Tu Bishvat is a time to appreciate the world around us. Whatever is happening around the world, life in nature and the vineyard continues as before. This is the beginning of a new growing cycle.

Let's focus on nature and appreciate all the trees, vineyards, and olive groves in the Land of Israel. ■

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