

DAMAGED GRAPES MAKE BEAUTIFUL WINE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Israel is the Start-Up Nation, known for groundbreaking advances in medicine, agriculture, and technology. To all the inventions and initiatives, we can now add another one: vinotherapy.

This is a method of treatment for individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress. It could be an army veteran or a survivor of a terrorist attack. The trials and research are being done here, and to my knowledge Israel is the only place in the world exploring the idea of treating those coping with post-traumatic stress through the process of viticulture and winemaking.

Everyone knows and talks about physical injury. It is noticed, acknowledged, and dealt with by the system. Rehabilitation may come at a great cost, but at least it is in full view. What is hidden under the covers, not talked about, and pushed aside into the recesses of the mind is another unseen cost: the mental anguish and damage to the soul.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an insidious, devious enemy. It hides in dark corners and surprises you when you least expect it. Many macho Israelis push strange, unfamiliar feelings aside, thinking that acknowledgment of a problem is a sign of weakness.

When PTSD taps you on the shoulder, it can affect you in too many ways to explain. It has a chameleon-like ability to work its poison. Everyone is affected differently. It makes diagnosis more difficult because it does not follow a format or recipe. Those affected may not know it themselves, and the effect of trauma may take many years to show itself. In this country, the budgets to support people with mental health issues are embarrassingly low.

FOR TOMER WEINBERG, the nightmare began on July 12, 2006. He was severely wounded in the major, well-documented attack on the northern border. We won't go into the horrors, pain, and tragedy. It is sufficient to say that Weinberg, a young man of 26, survived, but he was scarred physically and mentally.

He went through a series of painful operations and a long rehabilitation period over a few years. With great strength of mind and determination, he managed to recover and had all the possibilities of returning to an almost normal life.

Then he was faced with a new challenge that kicked in without warning. PTSD came knocking at the door. The mental terrors affected his mood and physical well-being. Weinberg lost well over a decade, as the unseen enemy destroyed his life. The ability to study, date, work, have a relationship, and live a normal life was affected. Day-to-day living, which we take so much for granted, was debilitating. Suffice it to say that life went on but passed him by. He was an emotionally handicapped passenger unable to contribute or be involved in anything.

Weinberg's turnaround began when he was grieving for his father, who was killed in a motorcycle accident in 2021. Weinberg senior was an amateur winemaker. I suppose the name is a giveaway. During the mourning period, Weinberg junior found himself staring at a



WINEMAKING AT Terra Uma is a participation sport. Everyone joins in. (Photos: Terra Uma)

wine barrel that happened to be in his line of sight, and he had an epiphany. Suddenly, for no particular reason, maybe unconsciously to honor his father, he decided that he wanted to make wine.

He chose two great places to learn the trade. Asaf Margalit of the Margalit Winery, and Hai Vortman of Vortman Winery, a true vigneron, both generously gave him their time. Quite quickly the wine bug grabbed Weinberg, and he decided to take a course at the Soreq Winery Winemaking School.

He discovered that when he was around wine, the anxiety, fear, and tension dissipated as if by a miracle. He made his own wine. At the end of the process, he was able to hold in his hand a bottle of wine that was his creation. The feeling of triumph and exhilaration he felt had previously been foreign to him because of the post-traumatic fog. He realized there was something about wine that connected to his inner self. It gave him a sense of calmness and tranquility.

With great emotion, he described the wine's fermentation as symbolic of the post-traumatic state of mind. "We are in the stage of a mental storm, staying in a closed, dark space with little air, stifling ability and potential; and then there is the accumulation of sediment, which is so hard to rise above." He went on: "This sediment confines you, holds you down, and it can trip you up for the rest of your life." However, as he revealed to me, when the wine drops bright and you remove the grape skins and lees, "we manage to rise above it and discover a new world, new abilities, and a renewed passion for life."

This, for him, was symbolic of taking the rucksack full of bricks off his back and releasing him from the demons that ruled his every move.

HIS SECOND epiphany was that he realized that if the winemaking process could help him, it could



also help others. So, in 2022 he founded a nonprofit organization called Terra Uma – a combination of the words "earth" and "tranquility." What it is offering, in effect, is vinotherapy, helping people cope with PTSD by going on a wine journey that leads from being very alone and disconnected to reconnecting with society.

Weinberg showed great drive and wisdom in how he got the wheels turning. Ido Lewinsohn MW, owner of Lewinsohn Winery, was quick to offer advice and support, and he now sits on the organization's board of directors.

It works like this. Veterans and individuals coping with trauma can sign up. At present, there are 18 people in the program, from all walks of Israeli society. Each participant produces his or her own wine, so every wine represents that individual's personal journey. At the center is the individual wine barrel, which Weinberg describes as representing the soul of each person. The design of the labels is creative and personal, and the text on the back label is a page for personal thoughts and feelings.

The wines are all made in small batches, so every wine is at the same time a work of art and a collector's item.

Each embryonic winemaker is accompanied in his or her task by an internationally trained winemaker who has volunteered his assistance. A shout-out to winemakers who freely give their advice and expertise: Dror Engelstein (UnderDog); Jonathan Koren (Hayogev 8); Asaf Margalit (Margalit); Guy Eshel (Dalton); Or Nidbach (Tabor); Dana Beny (Tulip); Oren Kedem (Assaf); Meital Damri Koll (ex-Carmel); et al. It is quite an A-team of winemaking talent.

The group is also supported by therapeutic treatments and experts offering emotional support and tools for coping day to day. There are other activities, too. For instance, my son David Montefiore DipWSET volunteers his services for the cause by giving wine lectures on behalf of the W (WSET-approved) Wine School, as well as bibliotherapy courses.

Terra Uma also produces a wine called Layla, which is a joint effort. The Hebrew word *layla* means "night,"



TOMER WEINBERG, founder of Terra Uma, in the barrel cellar as the wines mature.

which is the hardest time for most people with PTSD. Layla Lavan is a white wine made from Colombard, balanced with Semillon. “White night” is a phrase used to convey being up all night. Any person with trauma is only too familiar with the experience of sleepless nights. The red wine is made mainly from Cabernet Sauvignon with a little Syrah. Layla Adom, “red night,” may hint at nights of torment and nightmares.

Thanks here are due to Barkan Winery, which provided the grapes, and to Dalton Winery and its winemaker, Guy Eshel, who helped make the wine.

Both the individual expressions and the Layla wines are available for purchase. Terra Uma is self-funding, so sales are important to support continued activities.

Terra Uma planted its own vineyard at Bat Shlomo in 2023, just east of Zichron Ya’acov, on the northern Coastal Plain. It is situated in a little valley on the southern slopes of Mount Carmel, where a modern Israeli wine industry took root over 140 years ago, founded by Baron Edmond de Rothschild. The village of Bat Shlomo was named after the baron’s mother, who was the wife of the Rothschild who had purchased Chateau Lafite for the Rothschild family.

The 1,650 vine seedlings were donated by Hishtil. And with the help of donations, offered expertise, and hard work, a barren field was turned into a beautiful vineyard with a topnotch trellis system and drip irrigation. Ari Erle of Bat Shlomo Vineyards was on hand to offer advice.

This has given Terra Uma a base. Weinberg said, “We learn from the vine how to climb, how to hold on to each other, and how to ask for help.” He went on: “The vines teach us that everything is cyclical. In the winter, the vine appears to be dead – but it is alive. The cycle gives us hope.”

He told me that working in the vineyard is a key part of the treatment process. It allows for deep conversation. The shape of the vineyard gives a sense of protection, allowing the heart to open up and stop the mind from overthinking. There is a sense of community and togetherness without the direct eye contact that can be a challenge.

Terra Uma is helping to break a few stereotypes. PTSD is generally thought to be a man’s thing, and somehow it is not associated with women. It is tough for women



PARTICIPANTS MAKE their own wine, with their personal artwork and text on the label (above).

to be accepted in a man’s world in the first place, and if their souls are damaged during military service or due to terrorism, the whole system is less equipped to understand that women experience trauma, too. Fortunately, things are changing, and Terra Uma is a fine example. It proudly has women in its program as well.

As a dog owner, I always notice and appreciate a wagging tail welcome to a winery. One thing particularly noticeable is the number of dogs mooching around in all Terra Uma activities. That is because dogs are not just man’s best friend but also the best companions to brave veterans coping with trauma. These are specially trained official service dogs capable of calming their owners and easing stress. You will see them in the vineyard and winery, supporting their masters like winemaking assistants.

Tomer Weinberg is driven as though making up for lost time. He is a whirlwind of drive and activity. He is so committed and is sharp, charismatic, and dynamic, with a fine sense of style and a passion for wine from the soil to the glass. He is proving to be a very smart manager and organizer. The research Terra Uma is doing is so unique and so important.

However, it is a struggle. This brave project does not just need your support, it deserves your support. So buy a bottle of wine here and there. Enjoy a bottle of Layla with your family or give one of the beautiful gift



TERRA UMA’S wine is called Layla, featuring both a red and a white.



Below: EIGHTEEN VETERANS are taking part in this year’s Terra Uma Vinotherapy program.

boxes to friends or colleagues. It all helps, and it can be your way of making a contribution.

Terra Uma will positively affect the lives of many, bringing damaged souls from despair to fulfillment. It is a unique, praiseworthy, and brilliantly conceived start-up.

I asked Weinberg what his dream was. He did not pause for a moment: “To open the first vinotherapy winery in the world.”

In closing, Weinberg, a damaged soul in remission, says: “This journey as a whole teaches us that we will probably never be the grapes we once were, but we can still make a beautiful wine!”

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

