

# HAIL TO THE ANCIENT WORLD



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

I often say kosher is not a country, and Israel is not an island. Although our wines sit on the kosher shelves in America, we really would be more at home sitting as an integral part of our own wine region. And our geographical region is the Levant, or Near East, which is part of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Eastern Mediterranean wine countries are Cyprus, Greece, Lebanon, Türkiye, and Israel. This is the cradle of wine culture, which brought it to the West. By rights, the wineries from these countries should be bracketed together on wine lists and placed together on the shelves. They should be under the heading “Eastern Mediterranean” rather than “Others” or “Rest of the World” as occurs now in most of the leading wine stores.

Apart from confirming Israel’s wine region, the wine world is divided by other terminology. For instance: New World and Old World. If France, Italy, and Spain represent the Old World, then Argentina, Australia, Chile, and South Africa represent the New World.

This terminology was once categorized by geography and wine style, but the differences have become

a lot smaller in the last decades. There is an overlap because winemaking has modernized everywhere and changed more in the last 25 years than the previous 2,500.

However, when the Israelites and Judeans were making wine, they were part of what should be known as the Ancient World. This is also true of the other East Med countries. Just think about it. The wine connoisseur of 2,500 years ago would doubtless have been familiar with wine from the places we now refer to as Cyprus, Greece, Lebanon, Türkiye, and Israel – but not from France. Welcome to the “Ancient World.”

## The Caucasus

If we are talking about the Ancient World, then we have to mention the Caucasus. This is where we are always taught that wine came from. Noah was the first vigneron according to the Bible, and the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat, near the border between Eastern Turkey and Armenia. Here the Bible, history, and folklore coincide.

Most wine books will say that Georgia was the birthplace of wine. The oldest evidence of wine was from residue on a potsherd from the village of Hajji Firuz Tepe in Iran’s northern Zagros Mountains, near the Caucasus, which was dated to about 5000 BCE. Lat-

er, evidence was found of actual winemaking inside a cave near the village of Areni in Armenia. This was dated to 4000 BCE and, as a result, the Areni-1 site is now known as the oldest discovered winery.

A very recent study proposes the theory that grapevines were domesticated in the Caucasus and Levant much earlier, circa 9000 BCE. This research was done through studies of DNA. Of course, the southern Levant includes what is today Israel. Here, the wine cellar of a Canaanite king at Tal Kabri in the Galilee was uncovered that was dated from circa 2000 BCE. It is the oldest wine cellar found in the Levant.

We think of the countries of today divided by modern-day borders, but at the dawn of wine history the regions were broader. However, it is sufficient to say that it all began in the southern Caucasus and the Levant.

Certainly, the world of wine geeks has fallen in love with Georgian wine. The wines are so authentic and different, and they are often produced in the same way as they were thousands of years ago. Their wine culture is as old as time.

Growing unpronounceable grape varieties, making wines in their *qvevri* (large egg-shaped clay vessels), and burying them in the ground to keep them cool is quaint and exotic to many. They were making nat-

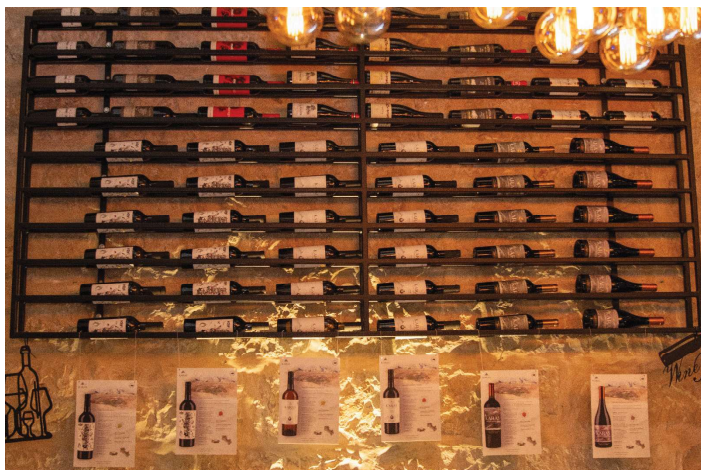
KARAS VINEYARDS are high elevation.  
(Photos: Holy Land Trade Group)

NASSAR & NISREEN ODEH, owners of Taboon & Wine and importers of Karas wines to Israel.

KARAS’S RESERVE label is flying the flag of Armenian wines.







ural wine long before natural wine became a category or talking point. This means the oldest wine culture has become the new “in thing” to many, over-fed and fed-up with wine globalization, standardization, and sameness.

#### Armenian wines

At the recent Sommelier Trade Exhibition in Tel Aviv, I came across an Armenian winery. That piqued my interest. Armenia is one of those countries in the southern Caucasus. It is a small country, with a population of only three million, and it is landlocked between Georgia, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

I admire small countries like Taiwan and Singapore surrounded by adversity and hostility, and Armenia is in that category, as of course is Israel. Anyone who forgot this was reminded when Israel was attacked on seven fronts from Oct. 7, 2023, and onward.

Furthermore, Israel has a connection with Armenians. There is an Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem's Old City. Real politic is something I don't understand, but Israel can't hold its head high with regard to its dealings with Armenia.

Israel officially still refuses to acknowledge the genocide of Armenians at the beginning of the 20th century, and it supported the wrong side with arms in the recent brutal war. It is just as well that I live in a wine bubble and don't have to explain politics. Anyway, Armenians don't just produce beautiful ceramic plates, they also produce wine and have a wine history as long as the Georgians'.

Armenia was always a land of wine and vineyards but was just quieter about it than Georgia. When Armenia became part of the Soviet Union, most of the wineries became production plants to make the base product for distilling brandy. As a result, the country is more famous for its Armenian Brandy. Ararat Brandy is the brand people will know.

The art of making wine for quality purposes fell by the wayside and in both Georgia and Armenia, and bulk cheap wine to keep the Soviets in drink was the order of the day. When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, Georgians took strength and inspiration from their past to revive their wine industry, whereas Armenia made more of a total restart. New investors, expat Armenians, and external consultants came in with the objective of creating a new wine industry.

#### Karas winery

Karas winery was one of those. This is a winery founded and owned by the Eurnekian family from Argentina, who are owners of a large conglomerate of companies with very diverse activities. They own wineries in

Argentina, including Bodega del Fin del Mundo in Patagonia. Descendants of Armenians, the family decided to invest to renew quality winemaking in Armenia. They built their winery in the Ararat Valley of Armenia. Their slogan is “Where the beginning (Ararat Valley) meets the end (Patagonia).”

Karas is the Armenian word for “qvevri,” the previously mentioned large clay amphorae used for winemaking. The winemaker is Gabriel Rogel, an Argentinian who has gone to live in the Armenian capital of Yerevan. The consultant winemaker is Michel Rolland, arguably at the top of the tree in terms of influence and track record over decades.

Snow-covered Mount Ararat overlooks the vineyards, which are from the Armavir Region and are located at 1,000 meters above sea level. Soils are basalt, volcanic tuff, limestone, and alluvial stones. There are those who say the most successful international variety in Armenia is Syrah.

Of course, unlike in Israel where international varieties dominate, Armenia, like Georgia, has masses of indigenous varieties. The most well known of these are Areni and Sireni reds, and Voskehat and Kangun among the whites. Areni Noir is the red variety most associated with Armenia. It has cherry berry aromas, with a bright freshness and a good, prominent acidity. The Sireni variety gives color, deep fruit, and tannin.

Voskehat was once exclusively used to make brandy. Today, it is being revived in its use for quality whites. It has a grassy character with aromas of stone fruits and citrus, and a mineral texture. Kangun is a cross of a Ukrainian grape and Rkatsiteli, which is very prominent in Georgia. It was originally created for making wine for distillation but has now found its own place making fresh and aromatic wines.

#### Meeting the importer, tasting his wines

On seeing the wines in Israel, I immediately wanted to meet the importer. Within days, we arranged a meeting. I met Nassar Odeh in my unofficial office at Cafeneto in Ra'anana. He is a charming man, suave, elegant, and very dynamic, with a finger in many pies. He is definitely a jack of all trades and has built a company called Holy Land Trade Group, which has extraordinarily broad interests.

Wine is quite a specialized subject, so I was interested to learn how fermented grape juice came to be one of his interests. He told me it all began with an Armenian friend who taught him about Armenian food and, from then on, he grew to love it and look out for it.

Alongside the business graft and the constant demands of importing, selling, and juggling numerous plates in the air during every minute of the day, there

THE LAUNCH of Karas wines was held at Wine & Taboon in Jerusalem's Old City.

THESE ARE the large clay jars used for winemaking that give Karas its name.

is also a side of him that pines for the good life. He believes in working hard and playing hard. “To make money is easy, but you have to enjoy life,” Odeh said. This is how he found himself owning Taboon & Wine, close to Notre Dame in the Old City of Jerusalem. Here he has been able to spread bonhomie by offering Armenian food he loved with the wines of wineries owned by Israeli Arabs – like Ashar Winery from the Western Galilee and Jascala Winery from the Upper Galilee – as well as Palestinian wineries like Taybeh Winery in at Taybeh near Ramallah, and Philokalnia from Bethlehem.

Odeh then decided to extend the theme by importing Armenian wine. He launched the Karas wines there; but since COVID, Oct. 7, and war in succession have not been conducive to business or tourism, it is currently closed. We hope not for long.

I was able to sample five wines. The entry-level wines are charmingly called Kef (which in Hebrew means “fun”), which show a busy label depicting a groaning table with a family sitting around it.

Food, wine, and hospitality are an integral part of Armenian culture. Here, there is great similarity with Georgia. The Kef White is a blend of Kangun and Chenin Blanc; the Kef Red is made from Areni and Malbec. The Kef label represents good value and is a good introduction to Armenian wines.

In the mid-price range, I tasted a varietal Kangun and Areni. Out of these, I must say I preferred the white, which was medium-bodied with a taut texture. The top-of-the-range one I tasted was the Karas Single Vineyard Areni. This was a more complete wine, and it gave more than a hint of this grape variety and the potential of Armenian wines in general. This is certainly a winery that has invested in quality – it will be interesting to follow its progress.

Now I will be looking out for other Armenian wines. After all, wine is armchair tourism. Uncork a bottle of Armenian wine, and you are already halfway to Armenia. ■

*The writer is a wine trade veteran and a winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wine for 38 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. [www.adammontefiore.com](http://www.adammontefiore.com)*