

BORN IN A GARAGE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

A garage in a domestic house is a good place for a car. However, most garages end up being the extra storeroom. Everything you think you may need is carefully spirited away in boxes and stuffed into the garage. Of course, when you need something specific, you know you saved it very carefully but can never find it.

I suppose the craft brewer may use his garage as his playground, but how about making wine in a garage? That would be something new! Well, not exactly. The rise of American critic Robert Parker coincided with the French domestic artisan winery that was small enough to fit in a garage. Some of these produced wines in the Parker style, and he fanned the new interest by giving them high ratings. The French term “*garagiste*” wine was born.

One of Israel’s most notable wineries was born in a garage. Lewinsohn Winery was founded in 2007 in the garage of Amnon Lewinsohn of Hod Hasharon, in the southern Sharon plain. It made four barrels in that first year. However, it had a successful start because it had a good winemaker – Amnon’s son Ido Lewinsohn.

The winery swiftly gained notice in the rarefied elite’sphere of top restaurants for its white wine which made the winery’s name. The white was a well-balanced Burgundian-style Chardonnay. The label was called Garage de Papa, which already told the story. The next heads-up to something special was the pioneering Whole Cluster Red, which was a totally new technique in Israel at the time.

But Lewinsohn was a winery that was low key and under the radar. The wines were scarce, and the Tel Aviv wine intelligentsia may have known about them, but no one else did. There was a big open day once a year when the great and the good of Israeli wine would invade the house in Hod Hasharon for an hour or two of schmoozing, but that was it. Even the winemaker was busy elsewhere, at his day job.

Ido Lewinsohn was a winemaker for Recanati Winery. There, he was part of a team but was very influential. He was extremely creative, managing to

effect change, and it greatly contributed to turning around the winery’s fortunes.

It was he who found a dilapidated old vineyard in the Judean Foothills, where he had the foresight to see a hidden potential. The iconic Recanati Wild Carignan was the result.

Then he steered the winery to a more Mediterranean slant, on the premise that Mediterranean varieties were more suitable for the Israeli climate. He made the first wine from Marselan and a flagship white from Roussanne and Marsanne.

Carmel and Vitkin were the first wineries to go Mediterranean in the early 2000s. Vitkin was the real ABC (anything but Chardonnay & Cabernet) icebreaker. It was a decade later that Recanati picked up the Mediterranean mantle, but it did so with persistence and consistency and introduced the Med message throughout the range.

Ido Lewinsohn was also the first to make a wine in modern times from one of the Holy Land’s ancient indigenous varieties. The wine was a joint venture between a Palestinian grower and an Israeli winemaker. It was called Marawi (in Hebron, it is known as Hamdani) and made a noise beyond its quality because of its origin.

Just as Lewinsohn was appointed joint chief winemaker of Recanati Winery, he was headhunted by Barkan Winery, which vies with Carmel for the title of the largest winery in the country. This job was on a scale that entailed abilities of organization, management, and logistics as much as winemaking. At Barkan, Lewinsohn also made changes of innovation and quality, particularly by introducing the Beta label for Barkan, and the Segal brand was relaunched. The Beta label has become established, but the Segal wines were less successful sales-wise. Lewinsohn also dabbled further in the historic indigenous varieties, producing a Marawi, Dabouki, Be’er and Yael and also made an award-winning Argaman, the Israeli variety.

It was during his time at Barkan that Lewinsohn joined the pantheon of wine gods by becoming a Master of Wine. He was Israel’s second MW after Eran Pick MW of Tzora Vineyards. There are only just over 400 MWs in the world, and a mere 100 or so are also winemakers. So

IDO LEWINSOHN, Master of Wine, owner-winemaker of Lewinsohn Winery. (Photos: Lewinsohn Winery)

LEWINSOHN IS a family winery.

it was a very great achievement and an honor for him and for Israel. From being an “also” winemaker, he became a standout figure in Israeli wine.

Ido Lewinsohn had studied viticulture and oenology in Milan. He had work experience in Tuscany, Languedoc, the Rhone Valley, and Tasmania. Therefore, he has a highly developed international perspective. He has made wine in the Rhone Valley (his first winemaking job), in Cyprus (a joint venture between Barkan and Kamanterena wineries), and in Germany (Lewinsohn and Kuntz wineries working together). He now lives in Tuscany, where he consults, but he hops back on regular flights for the main wine-growing and winemaking activities. When he is not at home, he has associate winemaker Igor Ivanov to watch over the shop. Ivanov also graduated in Italy and worked under Lewinsohn at Barkan.

Ido Lewinsohn is always kind, friendly, respectful and giving, but he has great ability to focus, concentrate, and compartmentalize. I always feel he is like a coiled spring waiting to unleash his focus and talent on some new project. He makes wine with acute intelligence, with a refined understanding of marketing. He is a restless innovator, a pusher, and hard on himself if he does not succeed in something right away.

DURING THE time Ido was playing in the sand pits of Recanati and Barkan, Lewinsohn Winery was steadily growing. It moved to a temporary site in 2017 before relocating to a permanent home in 2023. With a flash and a tinkle, the winery has come out of hibernation and has now become one of the more active and lively wineries around.

To visit one of the best wineries in the country, you usually have to plan and travel. The Golan, Upper Galilee, and Judean Hills are reasonably far away from Tel Aviv. Well, Lewinsohn Winery is situated in Petah



VINO ARRAY: Rouge, blanc, rosé.

Tikva, easily accessible from the center of the country. It is part of a complex that includes Nono and Mimi, the very successful and tasty creation of Ido's brother, Dovev, and brother-in-law, Yaki Boneh. The complex is like a cathedral to the outsize success of the Lewinsohn family.

The reincarnation of Lewinsohn Winery is complete. It has changed from a rather shy, bashful, secretive winery into one of the most active, sought-after wine venues. It produces 40,000 to 50,000 bottles a year, so is still a relatively small hands-on winery. But it is rich in content and options for the wine tourist. It is at once a winery with a visitors center, a wine bar with a full menu, and a wine education center for master classes and tutored tastings.

From 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., it is a winery and visitors center. Like at any winery, you can book a tour with an explanation and tasting, or buy a bottle and settle down with a friend with a cheese platter.

After 6 p.m. until 11 p.m., it turns into a wine bar. You can sit in armchair comfort inside or grab a seat outside on the patio and order wines and food cooked by Nono's chef.

The cultural and educational side of the winery continues with its own program. Lecturers include wine-makers, sommeliers, and other wine professionals. As it is a non-kosher winery, the tasting events and master classes are held in the barrel room, where wine lovers and connoisseurs are able to taste the finest Israeli wines and a broad range of international wines. The winery is open seven days a week. Apart from wine, it is also an events venue buzzing with activity. An event could be anything from a workshop of a celebrity chef to a live music concert. Every time I go there, it is throbbing with content.

However, it remains a family winery. When I turned up recently, Ido Lewinsohn's father, at a mere 78 years old, was working as a cellar hand in the winery with the enthusiasm of a young boy. I am sure he was not there just for my benefit. Then, by chance, Ido's sister, Yarden, came by. She opened and managed the iconic

first Nono Restaurant in Hod Hasharon and manages the winery visitors center and the wine bar. The point I am making is that to say it is a family winery is not just public relations. The essence of the winery is family.

OF COURSE, the core of any winery is its wines, and Lewinsohn's wines are some of the finest in Israel. The vineyards of the winery are cherry-picked from some of the best regions in the country. These include the Golan Heights, the Upper Galilee, Tzuba in the Judean Hills, and Givat Yeshayahu in the Judean Foothills.

The basic range is a red, white, and rosé.

The rosé is made from the Caladoc variety (a cross between Malbec and Grenache). The wine is fermented in stainless steel – nothing unusual about that; but it is then aged on its lees in 500-liter oak barrels for four months. This gives the rosé a texture and minerality, rare among Israeli rosés. It is delicious.

The Garage de Papa Blanc is a lean and elegant Chardonnay, loved by purists. It is different from the oaky peaches and cream style Chardonnays we were once used to. The Garage de Papa Rouge is mainly from Syrah, balanced with Petite Sirah, fermented in small open-top tanks. It is full of juicy fruit, but velvety and silky in texture.

The pièce de résistance is the rare, prestige Vendange Entière, or Whole Cluster red. It is made from Petite Sirah. The wine is sensual, floral, with an elegance that belies the mouth-filling flavor. And it may be cellared and will age beautifully. Probably the best Petite Sirah in the country. I used to think Lewinsohn's white was the star. Now I think his reds are outstanding.

So Lewinsohn Winery is a pearl that has landed like a meteorite in the greater Tel Aviv area, offering great wines, good food, wine culture, and education, along with fun events. Put a visit on your to-do list. ■

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

THE VISITORS center is a relaxing place for a glass of wine and a cheese platter.

THE GRAPES ready to be fermented in whole clusters, a method pioneered in Israel by Lewinsohn Winery.

LEWINSOHN'S SNOW-COVERED vineyard on the Golan Heights.

THE PATIO is packed with wine lovers during winery events.

