

Wine on the edge



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The Negev Wine Consortium was founded in 2020. Its purpose is to market the Negev as a fascinating wine region, promote tourism, and give wineries a framework for development. At the outset there were just over twenty wineries or vineyards that signed up for the idea, but nothing creates interest like success. Now there are nearly fifty, with small wineries and farmers, as if coming out of the woodwork, becoming eager to join in.

They have support from the very impressive Merage Foundation and professional guidance from wine educator/wine tourism expert, Guy Haran. The wineries exhibit together, host joint tastings, participate in symposiums, and undertake study tours overseas. Everyone is primed to talk up the main brand, which is Negev Desert Wines. It is all about selling your wine by marketing the growing region. The consortium is well organized and offers a successful blueprint for other wine regions to follow.

Only those crazy Israelis, with a spirit to do the impossible, would attempt to grow wine in a desert! Yet the growers do, with creativity, innovation, advanced technology, and Israel's renowned agricultural prowess. There is no lack of mountain, valley or coastal vineyards around the world. However, desert winemaking is something rare, different, and seen as reasonably exotic.

Today, the Negev is blooming... with vineyards! There are wineries dotting the wine map from Lachish to Eilat. Carmel traditionally had vineyards in the semi-arid northern Negev area, but the birth of the modern period of growth began in 1988. This was when a vineyard was planted in



Arad Valley, in the northeastern Negev.

The resulting Carmel Merlot 1992 was the first modern desert wine. The vineyard was later renamed Ramat Arad, and the wine was put under a blue Private Collection label. Later, Carmel's new single vineyard range launched in the early 2000s included three Ramat Arad wines, and in the early days, some of Yatir Winery's wines also used Ramat Arad fruit.

Negev winemaking's long history

Apart from Ramat Arad, there were also wine developments in the central Negev Highlands, and at Kadesh Barnea in the Western Negev on the border with Egypt. In the highlands, there were vineyards planted in Sde Boker and Mitzpe Ramon in the mid to late 1990s respectively for Tishbi and Barkan Wineries.

The boutique winery revolution also reached the Negev. Eyal and Hannah Iz-

rael founded the Carmey Avdat Farm in 1998. They planted a vineyard and began to make wine. At about the same time, Zvi Remek, a California-born resident of Kibbutz Sde Boker started making small quantities of wine with knowledge he had gained from his home state. In 1999, he founded Sde Boker Winery.

On the border with Egypt at Kadesh Barnea, Alon and Nira Zadok had their own

THE RAMON vineyard at Mitzpe Ramon is at 800 meters elevation.
(Joshua Schmidt)



PLANTING A vine in the sandy desert is a sign of hope and belief. (David Silverman)

dreams. In 1997, they planted a tentative vineyard of Cabernet Sauvignon. Most of their friends thought they were mad. They made their first wine in 2000, and in 2001, they founded Kadesh Barnea Winery, later to be renamed Ramat Negev Winery.

These pioneers were following a long, deep history of winemaking in the Negev. The Nabateans were nomads from Roman times, who mastered preserving and channeling the precious water from the sparse rainfall. They traded on the Spice Route and wine became a precious commodity. Then the Byzantines built a large successful wine trade. The well-preserved archaeological sites at Shivta and Avdat indicate how large production was. According to groundbreaking research led by Prof. Guy Bar-Oz of the University of Haifa, it was discovered that earthquakes, economic depression, and plague were the initial factors behind the decline in the Negev wine industry – more than the arrival of Islam.

There are some delicious tidbits uncovered by archaeologists. A pottery shard was found at the archaeological site of Tel Arad, which overlooks the modern-day Ramat Arad Vineyard and Yatir Winery. On it was written a message from a Judean soldier: "If there is wine, please send quantity." This was dated back over 2,600 years! Apart from being a mainstay of the economy, wine was then important for calories but also essential just for drinking, being safer to drink than the water.

Some random grape pips were discovered by Prof. Bar-Oz's team in a sealed cave at Avdat. The scientist researchers set to work; two of them yielded electrifying information. Through DNA testing and carbon dating, they were dated to be from 1,100 years ago and discovered to resemble the Syriki red grape variety (also known in Crete and Lebanon) and the Be'er white variety. This is possibly the oldest white grape variety ever identified. Movingly, these varieties have been replanted at Avdat.

The Negev difference and its king

So what is so different about the Negev? Firstly, it is dry, sandy and hot, with over 300 days of sunshine a year, a high, intense radiation, and meager precipitation. Most of the land is arid, and the soil is rich in salt but poor in minerals. The lack of humidity means fewer vine diseases. And the lack of cloud cover results in very cold nights, lowering average temperatures considerably. In the Golan, the pest is the wild boar that comes to gorge on the grapes just when they are ripe. In the Negev, it may well be the camel, roaming free. When they come across a vine, they eat it to the ground as though it was a salad.

Making wine on the edge required patience, experimentation, and research. Viticulturists, agronomists, and scientists have not stopped in their quest to conquer this most challenging of terroirs. These days, Prof. Aaron Fait of Ben-Gurion University is at the forefront of the R&D, along with the Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research. Wine folk from afar are carefully watching the developments in desert viticulture. It becomes more relevant as global warming bites them at home.

The main wineries flying the flag of the Negev today, following the map from east to west, are Yatir, Midbar, Pinto, Nana, and Ramat Negev.

The king of the castle is undoubtedly Yatir Winery, established in 2000. Eran Goldwasser, who graduated in Australia, is the winemaker. The winery is situated at Tel Arad. However, their wines now come exclusively from the high elevation Yatir Forest, referred to in the official published by the IPEVO "Land of Israel Wine Map" as the Negev-Judea Region.

They have a less expensive brand called Darom by Yatir, whose grapes hail mainly from Mitzpe Ramon, Ramat Arad, and "Negev-Judea." Yatir's Petit Verdot is excellent, Mt. Amasa is a great value, and I love the finesse of their new Mediterranean blend. As far as Darom is concerned, the white and rosé are a good value, and they have a new Cabernet Sauvignon.

Wineries galore

Midbar Winery, founded in 2010, is based in Arad. Most of its grapes also come from Mitzpe Ramon. The Viognier received impressive international recognition a few years ago. It also has a light, refreshing, fruity Pinot Noir, which I enjoy.

Pinto Winery, established in 2020, is the most interesting new start-up in the Negev wine stakes. It has planted a vineyard at Yeruham and built a new winery there. Ya'akov Oryah is its innovative winemaker. I like best the lean Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc, and spicy Shiraz. The Holot Red is a deep and promising Bordeaux style blend.

Nana Vineyard was planted in 2007 at Mitzpe Ramon, at an elevation of 800



meters above sea level. This is probably the most well-known vineyard in the Negev. This is because of the well-documented struggle of Eran (Nana) Raz, who succeeded to plant the vineyard against all odds. It had a great start with an excellent steely Chenin Blanc and a complex Syrah (Cassiopeia) but has since gone off the radar for me. Nana has developed vineyard tourism, which is rare in Israel.

Ramat Negev Winery is the largest

winery in the Negev. Alon Zadok's son Yoge, who studied and graduated in Italy, is the winemaker. The Ramon Malbec and Petit Verdot are some of the best reds I have tasted from the Negev so far. I recently tasted through the range, and the less expensive wines are both quality and very good values. I think it may be the most improved winery in the region.

One of the most intriguing things about the Negev is the different terroirs and the individuality of the people making the wines. There is such variety. From Moa Winery in the Arava, I recommend the Blanc, which is a multi-variety blend that is complex and precise. The Tzof Winery in Arad likes to experiment and push boundaries in making natural wines. I liked the Sangiovese and Petit Verdot when I tasted them.

Dreyer Winery in Be'er Milka has been inventive and resourceful in managing the vineyard, and also believe in nature and the natural. I love Boaz Dreyer's spirit, his smile, and his sheer enjoyment in what he does. His Chenin Blanc is an orange wine with flavor and complexity but also satisfying freshness, and the Merlot is good.

Galai Winery was founded in 2002 in Nir Akiva. There, Assaf and Sigalit Galai have made wines that have repeatedly won local awards for more than 20 years.

THE PAUKER RED made in memory of winemaker Gideon Pauker, murdered on Oct. 7, 2023. (Ish Anavim)

ANCIENT WINE presses at Shivta illustrate there was a big desert wine culture in Byzantine times. (Ron Peled)

My favorites are the Casa Negev Red and Marselan, and the Sweetie dessert wine is a delight.

Wineries in memory of Oct. 7

The newest wineries are those in the Western Negev's Gaza border region, whose communities were savaged on Oct. 7, 2023. At Kibbutz Be'eri, Tom Carbone, whose mother was murdered on that black day, has since founded Be'eri Winery. Dror Or, the master cheesemaker, was also murdered on that tragic day. Carbone continues to work in the dairy. By making cheese and wine, he is ensuring that their shared dreams come true. The dairy and winery merit support.

The late Oren Stern of Netiv Ha'asara was also killed on Oct. 7 while heroically battling the Hamas invasion. Weeks before that, he had been planning to build a family winery. His brother Eyal and sister-in-law Mali have made his vision become a reality. Not only did they establish Oren Winery, but they also produce a beer in his name. It is a wonderful place to visit and chill out... especially for wine and beer drinkers.

Most poignant is the Pauker Winery. Winemaker Gideon Pauker was murdered on Oct. 7 at Nir Oz. He had a small vineyard, which was damaged in the attack, and made Nir Oz wine in an unused shelter. His three partners in wine were kidnapped by Hamas. Haim Perry and Yoram Metzger were murdered in captivity, but octogenarian Gadi Mozes was set free after 480 days in the tunnels of Gaza.

With assistance from Haim Gan of Ish Ha'anavim ("The Grape Man) and wine-makers Meiram Harel of Amphorae and Shivi Drori of Gvaot, the Nir Oz wine was saved. The Pauker family then planted a new vineyard in Gideon's name and founded Pauker Winery. Gal Pauker, the grandson, is the winemaker, and Raz Pauker, the son (and father of Gal) is the vineyard manager. Their innovative winery truck is parked between the established vineyard and Nir Oz. Please visit to show support.

The Negev is the most fascinating wine region in the country and is a great place for agri-tourism. Stick a pin in the map, and there will be wineries, accommodation, restaurants, gourmet farms, and attractions nearby. The wines are not as well-known as those of the north and center of the country, but the passion and sheer individuality makes each new find a delight. Dive into a glass of desert wine, and experience the Negev.

The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for over four decades. He is known as the English voice of Israeli wine.

THE NEGEV DESERT

NEGEV DESERT WINE - Nicole Hod Stroh, CEO of the Merge Foundation Israel, explaining the Negev Desert Wine in Spain. (Javier Schejtman)