

The three musketeers



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

With the importance of California and UC Davis (University of California at Davis) to the first part of the Israel wine revolution, it is often forgotten that the Israeli wine industry was initially built on French expertise, with French sponsorship and with a dollop of influence from Bordeaux.

In 1882, Baron Edmond de Rothschild became involved in making contributions to those setting up the farming villages of the First Aliyah. He contributed funds, sent experts, and gradually, by stages, became more and more involved.

His early experts, such as Justin Dugourd, were agronomists. Dugourd was from the Gardens of the Palace of Versailles. The later experts, sent from 1886 onward, were viticulturists. This reflected the change in priorities. The farmers decided to focus on vineyards after a few years of experimentation and failure with other crops.

It was not relevant at the beginning, but Rothschild just happened also to be an owner of the famous Bordeaux winery Château Lafite, which had been purchased in 1868 by his father. In the famous Bordeaux Classification of 1855, Lafite was ranked first among equals. It could be argued it was the most famous winery in the world. Therefore, Baron Edmond had wine knowledge and the contacts to seek advice from the best experts.

In 1887, Rothschild visited Israel and metamorphosed from a mere philanthropist into a Zionist. He decided to create an Israel wine industry. Apart from his management and the administrative staff he put in place, he also surrounded himself with wine experts.

The main viticulturist was Gerard Emens. He had experience in Kashmir, where Rothschild had nurseries free from phylloxera for his winery. Prof. Gayon of the Station Agronomique et Oenologique in Bordeaux was the main wine adviser. Monsieur Dupuis from a family of Bordeaux winemakers was sent to Rishon Le Zion Wine Cellars to be the first winemaker. Charles Mortier, the *maître de chai* (cellar master) of Château Lafite, was the first wine consultant, and later he visited the new wineries. That was the wine team.

Rothschild built what were then large, technologically advanced wineries. His dream was to make a fine Palestinian Claret. Cuttings of Bordeaux varieties were brought from Lafite and from the nursery in Kashmir.

Unfortunately, farmers complained yields were too low, there was no demand



ISRAELIS IN BORDEAUX. The three musketeers (L to R): Eran Pick MW, Dan Sheinman, and Golan Flam – owners and winemakers of Château Tour du Haut-Moulin. (Photos: Château Tour du Haut-Moulin)

for a *Grand Vin*, and the vines eventually were affected by phylloxera, so they had to be grubbed up. However, when 100 years later, Israel began to make quality wines, it was with Bordeaux varieties (initially Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Sauvignon Blanc) that the breakthrough was made. The result meant that Rothschild's vision came true eventually, but it took 100 years.

NOW, 134 years after Bordeaux came to Israel, Israel made the return journey and has gone to Bordeaux. In an exciting development, an Israeli partnership purchased a Cru Bourgeois winery in the Haut Médoc in 2024. Tzora Vineyards, owned by Nathan Hevroni, and Flam Winery, owned by the Flam family, joined forces to buy Château Tour du Haut-Moulin. There is a greatly respected Israeli vigneron (Omri Ram at Château Lafleur), but there has never been Israeli ownership in Bordeaux.

Other Israelis have made wine abroad. Examples are Ido Lewinsohn (in Germany and Cyprus), Zlil Oblas (in Italy), and Touch by Fusion by Doron Yitzhaki. There are others. What makes the Bordeaux Israelis different from all

THE FIRST wine released under Israeli ownership – Cussac Le Vieux 2023.

these is that they will do it the hard way. Their project will be managed from the ground upward, from farm to table, or more appropriately, from vine to wine. For them, the vineyard is the thing. Growing wine (instead of grapes) is for them not a pretty slogan but a *raison d'être*.

The Hevroni and Flam families are similar in that they invest in quality and authenticity. No effort is too great in the search for making fine wines. Tzora Vineyards (est. 1993) and Flam Winery (est. 1998) are considered among our very finest wineries. Tzora Vineyards is awarded four stars in *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book*, while Flam Winery receives three to four stars. The partnership of these two wineries brings together some of finest wine-

makers on the Israeli wine scene. Each brings to the table prime expertise from a different region. Let's call them the three musketeers.

Eran Pick MW is the CEO and winemaker of Tzora Vineyards. He graduated at UC Davis. He is Israel's first Master of Wine, reaching the pinnacle of the wine world. There are only 100 or so winemaking MWs in the world. He has experience in California, Australia, and Bordeaux, including spending time at Château Lafite Rothschild. Furthermore, the consultant of Tzora Vineyards is none other than the great Jean-Claude Berrouet, legendary winemaker of Château Petrus. Pick has always been a Bordeaux wine lover and flag-waver for the region.

Golan Flam, winemaker of Flam Winery, graduated from the University of Piacenza in Milan and worked for a while at Carpineto in Tuscany. As a result, he is an out-and-out Italophile.

Golan is a second-generation winemaker. His father, Israel, was head winemaker at Carmel Mizrahi. He himself has already been a winemaker for 28 years.

The third part of the jigsaw is Dan Sheinman, also a winemaker at Tzora Vineyards. He is familiar with France, but the area of his expertise so far is Burgundy. He worked for three years at the celebrated Domaine de Montille. The trio together are a sparkling blend of winemaking experience, knowledge, talent, and ambition. One for all and all for one.

Aubert de Villaine of Domaine de la Romanée Conti once said: "Man can only make great wine if he is spiritually connected with his vineyard." This is an attribute that connects each of the three musketeers. Pick and Flam are close friends, partners in wine in the Judean Hills Quartet, with a similar philosophy of terroir-led wines, with elegance, texture, and drinkability. They both believe the vineyard is the key to producing quality wines.

They have something else in common. I get the impression they would much rather host people in the vineyards than at the winery.

Pick has a scholastic, academic air, but when walking the vineyard, he can't hide his excitement in finding yet another fossil, which he will pick up and pass around as though it were the first he has ever seen.

Flam can be quiet and taciturn. He is a man of few words. Until you get him



in the vineyard, that is. Then he will delight in sharing the whiffs of wild herbs caught by the wind, while pointing out the wildflowers and trees. He can be positively effusive with a vine and nature for company.

They are both energized and inspired in the vineyard.

Sheinman I know less well, but he is a vine cutting from the same nursery – knowledgeable, studious, and curious... and also with his feet deep in the soil of the vineyard.

These are people making wines with soul, with a beating heart of terroir. Their wines have the thumbprint of a person and a place. The vineyard is the essence, and the wine is the expression. There are no shortcuts here.

Now, 134 years after Bordeaux came to Israel, Israel made the return journey and has gone to Bordeaux

We should not forget one more person behind the scenes. Gilad Flam is CEO of Flam Winery. He is a deep thinker, strategist, business manager, and marketer of some experience, with proven accomplishments. He is talented, and his attention to detail, aesthetics, style, and quality more than matches the skills of the winemaking trio. He is not up front. It is the three musketeers who will receive the kudos, but his contribution fleshes out the partnership and fills in the gaps in the dream team.

From the moment they shared the idea, it took them five years to accomplish their objective. During that time, they looked at more than 40 properties.



THE OWNERS, winemakers, and grower of Château Tour du Haut-Moulin: Lionel Poitou (L) and the three musketeers.

They were looking for a quality vineyard, a good property and estate, with promising sales potential. In most instances they were satisfied by one parameter, but the others were insufficient. However, in Chateau Tour du Haut-Moulin, they were satisfied by each criterion. Most striking and most crucial was the quality of the vineyard, which was well cared for, in good condition, and had the potential they were seeking.

Château Tour du Haut-Moulin was established in 1870. It is situated in the village of Cussac Le Vieux, which is part of the neighborhood of Cussac-Fort-Médoc. It lies in between Saint Julien and Margaux, and is in

close proximity to the left bank of the Gironne River. The vineyard, with the traditional gravel soil, is divided between Cabernet Sauvignon 50%, Merlot 47%, and Petit Verdot 3%.

The previous owners, Lionel and Carol Poitou, will stay on to manage the vineyard. This will provide continuity. Lionel is a descendant of the founding family and was even born on the property. He has managed the estate for over 40 years and, according to the new owners, is a very knowledgeable and talented grower. They are delighted he has agreed to stay on to manage the vineyard.

Sheinman will be more frequently on site than the others. As a French speaker, with experience in France, he is the ideal choice as winemaker, but both Pick and Golan Flam will be involved in the tiniest viticulture or winemaking decisions. Try to keep them away! It goes with the material. You can't keep perfectionists at bay. However, they are also aiming high. Their wine consultant will be the very well-known, highly respected but equally modest Vincent Dupuch, who already advises the Flam family.

The Château has a good name with the most important critics. Influential American critic Robert Parker once recommended: "Tour du Haut-Moulin is a name shrewd buyers should check out." Jancis Robinson MW gave 17 points to the 2000. English wine personality Oz Clarke wrote: It is "consistently one of the best value Crus Bourgeois in the Médoc," and he listed it among "the best of the rest in the Haut-Médoc." In *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book* is written in

note form: "Classic wines, structured, to age." A fairly succinct summary. Stephen Brook, in his book on Bordeaux, referred to it as "this sterling property." So there is some basis and history here for the Israeli partners to build on. These are wines that can age. Pick chose the 1996 as one of his Desert Island Drinks on a recent podcast hosted by Patrick Schmitt MW of Drinks Business.

The first release is a wine called Cussac Le Vieux. The label has the look of classic Bordeaux, with a wildly flowery C, which I misread as a G. However, the hierarchy is Burgundy style. The village is given top billing. The winery is secondary, in small type. This is similar to the Tzora Vineyards recipe, where the wines are named after the plot, vineyard, and region. The winery name is low key. The label says the wine was "grown, cultivated and vinified by Chateau Tour du Haut-Moulin."

The Cussac Le Vieux 2023 has a delicate ephemeral enticing nose of black currants and berries. The wine is of medium weight with a vibrant freshness, which is its calling card, with tannins and acidity which cleanse the palate and provide a pleasingly refreshing finish. It is elegant and understated. The first expression is fewer than 3,000 bottles. I know it will be the first question I am asked, so yes, there will be a kosher cuvée in the future.

Good job, guys, but wine is a developing story. A tweak here and there may become effective over years, even decades. We will be watching with no little pride and great interest. *Bonne chance! Allez, on!* ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines over four decades. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com



THE WINERY of Château Tour du Haut-Moulin, with small vats for keeping individual blocks separate.