



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Kosher in Bordeaux

I was recently invited to a Shabbat meal in Paris by Menachem Israelievitch, winemaker of Royal Wine Corp. He generously opened a bottle of Château Léoville Poyferré 2005.

Looking at the label, it looks exactly like the regular wine. However, with your glasses on, looking closely at the capsule, you will discover it is a kosher cuvée. Furthermore, in the kosher niche, it is one of the best-performing kosher wines in quality terms.

Three weeks later, we had a family meal on Shabbat and decided to drink something special. I chose the Château Léoville Poyferré 2005, the regular non-kosher version.

It is a Deuxième Cru Classé (Second Growth), but it is regarded as a “Super Second,” because it regularly outperforms the category. You would think same vintage, same wine; or was it?

The main difference with a kosher batch made in a non-kosher winery is that production parameters must be planned proactively and decided in advance. The plots earmarked for kosher need to be chosen so the kosher crew can be booked and activated when the specific plots are harvested.

The barrels for the final blend are also determined in advance. The kosher barrels are the ones you have to make the kosher blend with. That is the sum of your selection. You can’t cross-blend to fill gaps and enhance missing characteristics.

With a non-kosher wine, the decision-making process is retrospective. The plots are harvested according to when they are ripe and ready. In essence, different plots will be ready at different times. The wine is then fermented and later barrel-aged.

Only at the tastings, plot by plot, barrel by barrel, is the decision taken on what to use for the Grand Vin, or what needs to be declassified down to a second wine.

When the celebrated Château Valandraud from St. Emilion made a kosher wine, it explained to the *Wine Spectator* that its wine was made from 40 vats, but the kosher wine was made from two vats.

The kosher cuvée may not differ by much, and it still can be high quality. It may even represent the character of the winery and local terroir. It carries the same label, the imprint of the winemaker, but even with the best will in the world, the kosher wine will not be the same. It can’t be.

Kosher seems to be spreading through Bordeaux like a rash. More and more wineries are making kosher wine. In addition, some pretty big names take on the task of making kosher wines very seriously.

Visit the wineries, and you see the ko-



PAGODA TURRETS of Chateau Cos d'Estournel: The writer (L) with Menachem Israelievitch and Olivier Cuvelier. (Photos: Royal Wine Europe)

sher tanks and barrels as part of the regular tank farm and barrel room. It is not like in the past when they were closed off by tarpaulins and padlocks, and often you were not able to see them without the man with a key.

These days, there will be masking tape over the taps or bungs. There is a new system to secure kosher barrels, which looks like a red pair of braces, which can only be accessed by the kosher crew.

WHEN I recently went to France, I enjoyed visiting a few wineries, all different, and was interested in how they cope with the kosher conundrum.

Why make kosher? To some, it was a healthy part of their sales.

As sales are contracting, a niche market that does not undercut or override markets or compete with existing customers is attractive. To others, it was the good price. Kosher wines are rarely cheaper than the non-kosher expression.

I have heard it said that it is important to make a wine everyone can drink. One was persuaded by the interest in the ko-

sher category in America. Another even mentioned his own Christianity as being a contributing reason.

Surprisingly, those wineries that make the jump into kosher production are not discouraged by the restrictions or put off by the nuisance value. They very rarely backtrack.

Let’s talk about leading names from different regions of the Haut Médoc in Bordeaux, starting with the more northerly appellation of St. Estèphe. Excitingly, for the kosher consumer, there is a wonderful new addition to the kosher portfolio: Château Cos d’Estournel.

It is also a Deuxième Cru Classé and is regarded as a “Super Second.” The beautiful Château is instantly recognizable because of its pagoda turrets. Inside, it is manicured in a regal, exotic way, exuding style.

The wine has a tradition of excellence. The Château Cos d’Estournel 2025 will be the first kosher cuvée, and it will vie with the very best kosher wines on the market.

For expedience, they harvested the Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot together for the Pagodes de Cos 2024, the second

label, and co-fermented them. Once, this was quite commonplace in Bordeaux. Now, because of smaller quantities and the need to be creative to make a quality kosher wine, they have chosen to do this.

The kosher connoisseur will be salivating at the thought of these wines being on the way. Pascal Chatonnet is the wine consultant of Clos d’Estournel. Among his other clients is our own Domaine du Castel.

WORKING OUR way south, the next major appellation is Pauillac, arguably the most famous. This is home to Château Lafite Rothschild and Château Mouton Rothschild, but also Château Pontet Canet.

This is a Fifth Growth, but is also in the group of “Super Seconds,” performing just behind the First Growths. Pontet Canet is well known for pioneering biodynamic wine practices in Bordeaux.

They have a team of horses to work the vineyards instead of tractors, cow horns full of dung are buried in the vineyards, and everything is as natural as possible.

One winemaker once told me: “I don’t know if being biodynamic works, but it helps me feel better about myself.” Well, at Pontet Canet it works, because since they started up this rabbit warren, the quality of wine has improved no end and prices have soared.

Interestingly, they operate according to the lunar calendar, as does Judaism. There is a point of convergence there. The winery has to be seen to be believed, and their devotion to their way is absolute.

They even destem by hand and uniquely have a micro-winery just for making the kosher expression in exactly the same way. Mathieu Bessonnet, the technical director, was open and friendly. There is nothing they will not do to absolutely follow the way they have chosen without compromise.

The aforementioned Château Léoville Poyferré is situated in St. Julien. They first made a kosher wine way back in 1999. They have their own system of maximizing the potential of the kosher wine.

They harvest as normal, but leave the end of all the rows untouched, because they ripen slightly later. These are then harvested separately, allowing the kosher crew to build a blend representing the different plots.

From Margaux, there is Château Lascombes. It is a winery that was considered good enough to be a Deuxième Cru Classé in 1855.

The Château has now returned to family ownership, and they lost no time in appointing a truly big name, Axel Heinz, as estate director. He has a sterling record at Ornellaia and Masseto in Italy.

He was generous with his time and fascinating with his answers to my questions. No doubt in my mind that Château Las-



Clockwise from top L:
TULIP VATS at Chateau Fourcas Dupre
in Listrac.
KOSHER BARRELS at Chateau Le Gay
in Pomerol.
ROSES AND VINEYARD of Chateau
Montviel in Pomerol.
OLD AND NEW mingle at Chateau
Bellefont – Belcier in St. Emilion.

combes, under new ownership and management, is climbing high and fast.

They have reduced production of the Grand Vin by identifying and returning to the best blocks historically from the time of the 1855 classification – symbolized by the excellent new La Côte Lascombes, a single-plot Merlot. Also, they invested heavily in the winery and thankfully dispensed with the blue lighting in the barrel room.

Of the kosher expressions, the Chevalier de Lascombes is more fruit-forward, the Château Lascombes more complex – maybe the difference between a lunch-time wine and a dinner wine.

They first made kosher wine in 2015, and will continue under the new ownership and management.

The blending of the kosher blend included the winery's team tasting with Royal Wine Europe's Menachem Israelievitch and their external consultant. In

this instance, it used to be the late, great Michel Rolland. It shows commitment and the importance to them of producing a kosher wine worthy of the name.

THEN THERE is the appellation of Listrac between Margaux and St. Julien. While home to Heritage Baron Edmond de Rothschild's Château Clarke, you'll also find Château Fourcas Dupré, a very old winery with new beginnings.

It was bought by new owners in 2019. Their interests are wine and tourism, and they also own hotels. They have invested in a striking new state-of-the-art winery with tulip-shaped concrete tanks under a wooden roof. A winery is no longer a factory making wine, but aesthetics, originality, and visual beauty are also issues.

Here, the number of tanks equals the number of plots. Amazingly, the original winery is preserved like a museum within a winery and a reminder of the long history of winemaking in these parts. The new owners decided to continue to make kosher wines, which they have been making since 2003.

The calling card of the winery is value. Not every Bordeaux wine has to be in the stratosphere. We were hosted by the charming, enthusiastic, and dynamic Lucas Leclercq. Château Fourcas Dupré exhibited a bright freshness and balanced elegance, and the sister winery

Château d'Agassac was more savory with a light smokiness, but was also a great value.

Quite apart from that, it is a good reference point for the Israeli-owned Château La Tour du Haut Moulin, which is not far away.

Then, nipping over to the Right Bank of Bordeaux, firstly to the beautiful St. Emilion. Château Bellefont-Belcier, a Grand Cru Classé, is a beautiful estate. Emmanuelle Fulchi, the enologist, is a real role model, fascinating to listen to, with a succinct, informative frankness, and she is also very modest.

They have beautiful and varied vineyards within sight, each with different soils and aspects. Here, their secret power is tourism.

It is a place to visit as they have beautiful accommodation, parklands, gardens, and woods. The stable of wines includes Château Tour Christophe and Château Le Rey, as well as Château Bellefont-Belcier. All were good, showing typicity and drinkability as well as quality.

In Pomerol, everything is on a far smaller scale. Château Montviel and Château Le Gay are two wineries that were under the ownership of the irrepressible, late Catherine Péré-Vergé. It was lovely to meet her grandson, Henri Junior, and to see how they preserve her vision and memory.

There has been a kosher Montviel since 2002, while Le Gay is from 2022. Here, the totally unique factor is that

the rare, limited edition Château Le Gay (mainly Merlot, with a little Cabernet Franc) is barrel fermented! This is another place where Michel Rolland was heavily involved and worked his magic.

BACK TO where we started. Which Léo-vile Poyferré was better – the kosher or not kosher wine? The answer is that both were a treat.

Three weeks apart, I could not say there were memorable differences. I would have to taste one alongside the other. I remember when kosher wines made in France were reasonably appalling.

Today, we are living in a golden age for the kosher consumer. The world's most famous wine critic, Jancis Robinson MW, once wrote that some of these famous Châteaux (mentioning Château Pontet Canet, Léo-vile Poyferré, and Malartic Lagravière (of Pessac Leognan) produce kosher wines remarkably similar to the non-kosher version.

The previous technical director of Pontet Canet, Jean Michel Comme, perhaps summarized it best of all: "the (kosher) wine cannot be the same but it has to get the soul of the place." I think most kosher connoisseurs and wine lovers will be happy with that! ■

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