Winery of dreams



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

If you are a *feinschmecker* and frequent the leading restaurants in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, you will see a name that keeps popping up on wine lists.

It is not one of the commercial wineries, big brands, or well-known small boutique wineries. You will find the name Zur Winery appearing again and again. Low-key but ever-present. It seems the leading sommeliers feel they have found a rising star.

If you find yourself in Paris and in the spirit of patriotic loyalty, visit Sharbour, Assaf Granit's Michelin-star restaurant, and you will find Zur wines on the wine list. Impressive, because most Israeli chefs abroad prefer to put Château Something from France on their lists rather than support their own country's wines.

The brand made its name because of its quality wines, starting with a Rose just at the time when the Rose explosion took root, and following with a creative, totally original Blanc de Noir.

Now, Zur Winery will become well-known because, in time for the 2026 harvest, it has opened a stunning new winery. It was once an olive oil press. It has now emerged as a winery of dreams.

Clad in stone, the handsome building is decorated with imposing, impressive, rustic oak doors at the entrance, and inside, a large oak table is center stage.

There is space, plenty of light, and vines, olive trees, wild herbs, and wild flowers are all around you.

There is a rooftop place to sit, schmooze, taste, and talk about wine, which offers a panoramic view of the Judean Lowlands and the Coastal Plain.

Hugging the building are vines from every vantage point. It is a rare, genuine estate winery.

The use of the term "estate" is a thoroughly abused word in our industry. It refers to a winery that receives all its fruit from its own vineyards, but the purest meaning of the word is when the vineyard and winery are in the same place, on the same estate, as it were.

Because Israeli laws are not geared to tourism, wine has always been regarded as industry, whereas in most of the world it is categorized as agriculture. So here, vineyards tend to be in the countryside, while wineries are on unattractive, detached industrial estates. Elsewhere, apparently wine is more appreciated, valued, and nurtured.

I once hosted a wine personality from the United States. We visited 13 wineries in three days. On the way to the airport, I was self-satisfied, patting myself on the back. We had achieved my objectives, and I thought I had done a good job.

Then my esteemed guest said to me, "Do you know, I have not visited or even seen a vineyard."

For an agricultural product where place and local terroir is important, it was an important message for me. I have never made the same mistake again.



ZUR WINERY is an estate winery surrounded by its own vineyards. (Photos: Zur Winery)

It is in the vineyard where the grower and winemaker craft the wine. Those committed to quality will say, "We grow wine, not grapes!" Certainly for me, if I have not seen the vineyard, I have not really understood the winery.

THE PERSON behind this dream winery is the slight bearded figure of Itamar Aviran. When talking to him, you get the feeling he can't quite believe it has all come to fruition. He is modest, self-effacing, and constantly thanking his lucky stars. He is grateful for a series of coincidences that fell in his favor, and says that he can barely believe he is making wines, and that people, wine professionals, and the end customer are prepared to buy them.

This humility and humbleness are a good sign in a winemaker. Too many Israelis are in the "I came, I saw, I conquered" category, where speech is peppered with what they did and what they achieved. In our business, loud self-confidence and complacency usually amount to less authenticity and credibility. The studied, quiet approach is always more impressive.

Aviran sees himself as an agriculturist who, over the last decade, has become intimate with his vines. He has three children, but regards his vineyards collectively as a fourth child. Like at the parents' evening at school, he constantly discusses potential with his vines and feels his job is to interpret what they are trying to say.

He loves living and operating within the nature that circumstance has given him. He does not impose his winemaking needs on his vineyards, but adapts to include the animals that visit and inhabit his patch and the flowers and herbs, bushes and trees, that called this place home before Zur Winery arrived. Aviran humbly sees himself as a caretaker. He fits in, rather than imposing a master plan.

Fifteen years ago, he barely knew what a vine was. He was brought up at Paran, a moshav in the Arava, 100 km. north of Eilat, and instinctively warmed to the agricultural activities there. He loved nature, the flora and fauna, and appreciated the dance agriculturists have to do to be in sync with challenging surroundings.

With the support and encouragement of his wife, Noa, he was presented with a series of opportunities, which he grasped with both hands.

Noa's family hails from Karmei Yosef, situated in the rolling Judean foothills. Around Tel Gezer, it owned some agricultural land needing care and attention.

Tel Gezer is an ancient archaeological site, nature reserve, and national park, offering evidence of settlement from the Canaanite period onward, with ancient wine presses illustrating that it was a wine-growing region through the ages. The Judeans made wine here over a 1,000-year period.

In 2010, Noa suggested he satisfy his craving for agriculture by working the land owned by her parents.

Itamar understood that this chalky soil



WINERY LOGO: head of a gazelle or deer.



TASTINGS TAKE PLACE at the large oak table at the center of the room.

would support vines and olive trees, but not much else. He thought vines would be more interesting for the budding agriculturist than olive trees, which are more independent.

He planted vineyards in 2012. This included Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Shiraz (the Australian clone), and Petit Verdot. He did a course with the Soreq Winemaking School under the tutelage of Nir Shaham, one of the great unsung heroes of Israeli wine.

Initially, he was quite happy to be a grower, supplying grapes for the Flam family, friends of his in-laws.

The first vintage was in 2015. It was a notably difficult year, characterized by hamsins and an unusual sandstorm that cloaked the country for a number of murky days.

Here, Noa was key. She had spent a period of time in Australia. She knew wine, was familiar with wine culture, and pushed, steered, and encouraged her husband to be not only a winegrower but also a winemaker.

For fun and to complete the learning experience, he decided to make wine. It turned out to be rather good, and the idea of a winery was born.

Aviran studied and graduated in viticulture and enology at the Faculty of Agriculture of the Hebrew University. The family moved to Hulda, home of Barkan Winery and the largest vineyard in the country.

He balanced his life as an agriculturist and winemaker with a dedicated army career. But his heart was in the vineyard.

He called the winery Zur as an homage to his wife (her maiden name) and her parents. They gave him the opportunity and the drive.

For the logo, he chose the handsome head of a gazelle or deer, one of the animals for which the vineyards and surrounding woods are home. On the labels, the gazelle is described as being "a majestic creature symbolizing nobility, curiosity, and family values."

Zvi (meaning deer in Hebrew) is also the name of a beloved grandfather and the couple's eldest son. All is thought out. It all fits in.

His first wine was a Rose made from Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Then he made his first red blend Sharkiya.

Shira Tsiddon, the esteemed sommelier of the prestigious Norman Hotel, was the first to find the light under a bushel. She listed the wine, and others among the Tel Aviv wine intelligentsia pricked up their ears, took notice, and followed suit.

Later, he expanded his vineyards by planting an adjacent plot with Petite Sirah, Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, and Assyrtiko, and another plot of Chenin Blanc alongside the winery.

He found a business partner, and the proof of the pudding is in the eating. You only have to visit the winery, taste the wines, and look into Itamar's blue eyes to understand the seriousness of it all. This is not an amateur start-up or a casual rich man's hobby.

He may appear uncertain, grateful, and almost surprised by the lot fate has dealt him, but what the winery shows is someone else entirely.



ZUR MAINLY PRODUCES white wines and roses.

This is a man of intense attention to the smallest detail, with immense drive and determination. He is a man of style and quality. Yet he is an absolute perfectionist. You just don't get this when you meet him. His casual, slightly diffident outer character belies all this, but the steel is inside; a steel fist in a velvet glove.

Doing it right like other wineries is not good enough. An example is the platters he uses to serve cheese and vegetables with the wine. Each plate is an individual creation, handmade into different wavy shapes, with compartments for the different foods, to the point that they can't be stacked as usual. The pottery cups have the winery logo stamped on the bottom. You can't see it unless you look, but perfectionism has no bounds.

AS FOR the wines, the winery produces 70% whites and roses. This is a sign of the times and the trends.

The main feature of the vineyards is the westerly winds that come from the Mediterranean. These are constant, so he names his wines after different winds – Zephyr, Levanter and Sharkiya – and thankfully he explains them on the labels.

We started on the rooftop with his Sauvignon Blanc 2025. It was fresh, tropical, with good aromatic notes. Refreshing.

I then tasted his Zephyr Rose 2025, delicate salmon pink, made from Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. It was fruity, fresh, and delicious, with a real presence in the mouth.

The most unique wine is Levanter Blanc de Noir 2025. This is unbelievably made from Cabernet Sauvignon, harvested in July. A red grape treated as though it was a white.

The wine had the palest onionskin tint and had fruit with a pronounced herbaceous character. It was mouth-coating, yet light, with good length. An original and rather enticing... and it works! In a world of sameness, it is a blast of sunshine. Unfortunately, he does not have much of this wine.

The main red is Sharkiya 2023, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and a little Petit Verdot. It was very fruit-forward, fresh (note how often that word is coming up), and vibrant, showing excellent drinkability.

Finally, we tasted the Petit Verdot 2023. It was restrained, slightly austere, and elegant, with a solid fruit core through to a long finish. I loved it. The Petit Verdot and Blanc de Noir were my favorites.

Itamar Aviran credits winemakers like Eran Pick MW (Tzora Vineyards), Golan Flam (Flam Winery), and Eran Goldwasser (Yatir Winery) as role models. He is flattered they show interest, and is reluctant to be considered a winemaker alongside them. However, they, along with wine expert Yair Haidu of Cheers, are not shy with compliments, and offer support and encouragement.

Wine is an expression of a person and a place. And here we have a new winery in our midst, making wine in the center of the country with quality, character, and imagination. I think we will be hearing a great deal more about Zur Winery in the future.

On the surface, you have Itamar Aviran, a nice enough guy who likes pottering in his vineyard. Peel off the onionskin and you find a determined, driven wine guy busy turning fanciful dreams into a focused vision and then fulfilling them. ■

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



ITAMAR AVIRAN is the owner and winemaker of Zur Winery.