

WINE

The Fruity Aroma of Success

by Michael Ben-Joseph

Israel is showing the world that the cradle of vine and wine has plenty of surprises up its sleeve, which are gracing the dinner tables of connoisseurs and ordinary wine-drinkers alike.

One of the amenities the Israelites complained about leaving behind when Moses insisted upon leading them out of Egypt were Egyptian wines (Num. 20:5). They needn't have worried: the Land of Israel had been producing a variety of wines long before the Israelites went to Egypt. These wines were very syrupy, were often diluted with water and mixed with spices, and were high in alcoholic content – most likely undrinkable by today's standards, but considered quality bever-





Top: The Golan Heights Winery
 Above left: A bottle of wine from the Castel Winery
 Above right: Winemaker Avi Feldstein of the Segal Winery

Above left: Ofra Tisbi at the Tishbi Winery
 Above right: Winemaker Eran Goldwasser of the Yatir Winery

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Above:
The Binyamina Winery

ages at the time.

Biblical Israel is regarded by archaeologists and historians alike as the cradle of vine and wine, home of a flourishing wine industry known throughout the Hellenistic and Roman world. Thousands of winepresses, fermentation amphoras, storage jars, and wine cellars uncovered in excavations attest to this fact.

The Bible mentions the different methods of vine growing and trellising; the word “wine” appears 207 times, “vine,” 62, “vineyard,” 92, and “winepress,” 15.

I recently conducted a tour near Beit Shemesh that included a visit to a very old and well-preserved winepress, which dates back to the Second Temple period. The tour also included the nearby Ella Valley Vineyards at Kibbutz Netiv Halamed Heh – a new modern winery, which put its first wine on the market this year. I was deeply impressed with the clean, meticulously trimmed rows of vines. Simply put, modern Israeli grape growers and winemakers have returned to the same locations as the ones used by their ancient predecessors.

Geographical Edge

Ancient Israel was positioned on the historic “Grape Route,” later to become the wine route, from Mesopotamia to Egypt. A long, navigable coastline with accessible ports facilitated the wine trade. A relatively mild climate and easy

access from the mainland to the sea were major factors in developing a local wine industry.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, agriculturists considered only the northern part of the country to be arable land; over the past decade, however, agriculture, including viticulture, has made inroads into the Israeli desert, thanks to local scientific research. The vineyards and winery of the Arava’s Kibbutz Sde Boker, for example, have been classed very high by wine critics.

Israel now has vineyards from the Golan Heights in the north (Bazelet Hagolan Winery) to the “deep” south (Neot Smadar Winery, 40 kilometers north of Eilat). Officially, there are five “wine regions” – the Galilee, Samaria, Samson, the Judean Hills, and the Negev.

The Right Climate

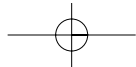
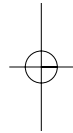
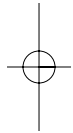
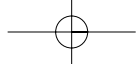
The idea that it’s impossible to cultivate good grapes in a warm climate is a myth – Israel, with its Mediterranean climate (warm to hot dry summers and cool, rainy winters), provides the proof. Climate is an important factor in successful grape cultivation; grapes have to be selected according to their affinity for a specific climate.

The local climate is primarily characterized by sharp variations in temperature between day and night and in precipitation; wind, relative humidity, and rate of evaporation are secondary variables. Many types of grapes have been found to grow well in such a climate.

Beginnings

The first recorded winery in the modern Land of Israel was founded in 1848 by Rabbi Shore in the Old City of Jerusalem. In 1870, the first Jewish European-style agricultural school was established at Mikveh Israel, paving the way for modern viticulture – which was launched in Rishon Lezion and Zichron Ya’acov in 1882 by Baron Edmond de Rothschild, owner of the famous Chateau Lafite winery in Bordeaux, as his first step in establishing a wine industry in the Land of Israel.

The Rothschild family had become involved with wine after composer Gioacchino Rossini asked his friend, Edmond’s father, Baron James de Rothschild, to acquire Chateau Lafite in 1868. The legacy of wine appreciation was



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Above: Many wineries maintain small shops on their premises.

10 Wineries to Watch

Here, on the basis of output and selection available, are Israel's 10 most up-and-coming wineries:

1. Carmel – Tel. (03) 948-8888
2. Barkan – Tel. (08) 935-5858
3. Golan Heights – Tel. (04) 696-8400
4. Binyamina – Tel. (04) 638-8643
5. Tishbi – Tel. (04) 638-0434
6. Yatir – Tel. (08) 995-9090
7. Castel – Tel. (02) 534-2249
8. Segal – Tel. (08) 935-8860
9. Tzora – Tel. (02) 990-8261
10. Chateau Golan – Tel. (04) 676-0444

passed on to Edmond, who was the first to apply French viticultural and enological knowledge in Palestine and to invest in their development. Those were the beginnings of the wine industry that exists in Israel today.

Vineyards on the Rise

It took time and serious research in order to reach a high level of vine cultivation and production throughout Israel. Every year, more vineyards are being added, with the area covered by vineyards reaching a total of 12,500 acres. Not only are new vineyards being planted, but the grapes are also getting better with every new planting.

The Israeli Grape Scene

More than 8,000 grape varieties are cultivated commercially in the world, but in Israel, only a few are cultivated. The classic Israeli grapes are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah (a more recent addition), Pinot Noir, and Cabernet Franc for the reds, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, and Muscat for the whites, with Emerald Riesling, an Israeli variety, leading the whites by quantity.

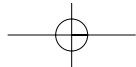
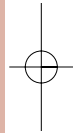
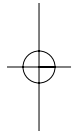
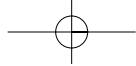
The undisputed king is Cabernet Sauvignon, which ages the best. In 1996, I did a tasting of the well-preserved 1976 Carmel Cabernet Sauvignon; amazingly, the oldest Israeli wine was still going strong after 20 years! Others are joining the club: the 1985 Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon, the 1988 Barkan Cabernet Sauvignon Reserved series, and many more.

The Cabernet Sauvignon vine is cultivated on various soils, in different climates. It's not a wine for beginners, or light wine lovers – it is a wine for connoisseurs, to be enjoyed always with food. Although it has a great deal of fruit, it is dry and slightly astringent (more so when young) and has a lot to give in structure and complexity. When it is well made, as is often the case in the leading wineries of Israel, its qualities as a wine for aging are outstanding.

Merlot, relatively new in Israel, is the second red grape that is considered noble. For the most part, it is regarded as a modest grape; in a few cases, it is the basis of some of the world's most highly appreciated and expensive wines, such as Chateau Petrus in Pomerol (France) and Vega Sicilia in Valladolid (Spain), both of which are legendary for their longevity.

In Israel, Merlot wine, produced and sold as a varietal, is sought out and remembered for its smooth texture and mild flavor. All Israeli Merlots, without exception, are average-plus wines.

Real newcomers to Israel are Syrah and Pinot Noir, both being looked after by several commercial wineries and a few boutiques. The former, a Rhone Valley original, has made a name for itself in southern France and Australia (Syrah accounts for 40% of Australia's wine grapes). It is a dry, dark, dense, tannic wine with a flavor comparable to that of Cabernet Cassis. Syrah needs time to show its greatness.



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Above: The Carmel Mizrahi Winery

Ben-Gurion's Vision

There is a famous story about David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister:

After he retired from politics to a cabin at Kibbutz Sde Boker, in the middle of the Negev, he had a dream: Sde Boker would produce wine. On one of his daily walks, he approached the duty manager of the kibbutz and asked him to plant grapes for wine.

The top experts on vines and grapes were summoned, serious research was done, and the conclusion that was reached was negative: no good wine grapes could be grown in the Negev's arid climate. Weeks later, Ben-Gurion asked the manager about the new vineyard for wine grapes. The answer was that according to the learned team, only table grapes could be cultivated at Sde Boker. Ben-Gurion's response was prompt and to the point: "Change the team of consultants." He turned out to be right: the wines at the Sde Boker Winery are at their peak.

Pinot Noir has taken a respectable place on the good wines table. It is a grape that is difficult to cultivate, and extremely difficult to transform into an above average wine. In the hands of professionals, Pinot Noir wines are superb.

Pinot Noir is called "the wine with a fist of steel covered by a silk glove." Comprising less than 1% of Israel's total 2003 vintage, it is produced as a respected variety, made by the Golan

Heights and Barkan wineries. The former also produces sparkling wine by the traditional method, with Pinot Noir as part of the blend.

Chardonnay has what the French call *couleur locale* – a local character, with a definite flavor of its own, typical of each country and vineyard. Unlike other wines, Chardonnay does not have a definitive style; the differences depend on soil, climate, grapes, and – most important – the wine-maker.

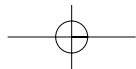
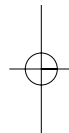
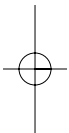
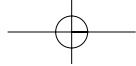
It should be remembered that Chardonnay is a wine to accompany food; it is not a leisure wine, and certainly not an aperitif wine. Only with the right food will the serious, well-made Chardonnay begin to speak!

The Chardonnay grape is an equal partner to the great and famous Champagne sparkling wines, and also the basis of the special Blanc de Blanc as a pure and single variety. The Golan Heights Winery is producing a respectable Blanc de Blanc, made according to the French formula of *methode champenoise* (inducing a second fermentation in the same bottle in which the Champagne is served at the table.)

Sauvignon Blanc is considered a classic variety throughout the world, but it is only a semi-classic for Israel due to its relatively short life; even under the best conditions, none of the Sauvignon Blancs will survive more than two years in the bottle. Nevertheless, it is increasingly catching on, with Israelis' newly acquired taste for dry white wines. The variety is very sensitive to overripening; the harvest should be precisely timed in order not to lose the needed acidity and, with it, its aromas. As little as a day too late can make the difference between a very good Sauvignon Blanc and a watery, flat, nonaromatic wine. When well made, it is a refreshing wine, with crisp acidity, a lemony-lime, green-grass aroma – a good wine to drink with cold Israeli dishes.

Emerald Riesling is the most popular wine in Israel, produced by every winery in the country. If Cabernet Sauvignon is the king, Emerald Riesling is the Israeli queen – perhaps not a great beauty, but still a lovable and sweet one. Every restaurant will offer a glass of Emerald Riesling with any food, at any time.

The vine is a cross of the noble white Riesling with the plebeian Muscadell; this relatively new



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Above: Silver wine vessels from Hadad Brothers.

grape was conceived in the 1950s by Prof. Harold Olmo at the University of California at Davis. The purpose of his research was to cultivate a grape with a Riesling character and develop and improve it for optimal quality in a warm climate. Israel is one of the few countries that have adopted Emerald Riesling and produce wines from it.

As a rule, wine made from Emerald Riesling grapes is in the medium dry to medium sweet category; it is seldom a dry wine. Lately, it has been upgraded by the Carmel Winery to the French oak-barrique class maturation, as the Private Collection series. The result is a pleasant, very refreshing, aromatic wine, with nice acidity and a light honey flavor.

The Muscat family is a large one with many branches, types, and names. The most common Muscat is Muscat of Alexandria. This is one of the most ancient vines we know, and the most suitable grape for Israel's Mediterranean climate. Muscat of Alexandria is made into semi-dry to semisweet dessert wines; a small percentage of it is produced as "late harvest," fortified with brandy, and sold as a Muscat liqueur.

In addition, there is Carignan, which accounts for 22% of Israel's grapes. Carignan grapes are blended by all Israeli wineries within their red wines.

Today, Israel is experimenting with many new varieties, such as Gewurtztraminer, Semillon, Petit Syrah, Chenin Blanc, Argaman (an original Israeli red grape), Cabernet Franc, Sangiovese,

Good Wines to Look For

Handcrafted Wines of Israel is an elite group of wineries representing Israel's finest boutique wines from select vineyards. Each wine is a unique expression of the *terroir* (physical conditions) of a particular region. These are not the only ones, but they do meet the requirements of any aficionado, in Israel or abroad.

Amphorae Winery, Makura, Mt. Carmel

Wines: Med Red, Rhyton, Cabernet Sauvignon

Bazelet Hagolan, Kidmat Zvi, Upper Golan Heights

Wines: Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

Chillag Winery, at Kibbutz Ayal, near Kfar Saba

Wines: Primo Merlot, Primo Cabernet Sauvignon

Domaine du Castel, Ramat Raziel, Judean Hills

Wines: "C" Blanc du Castel – Chardonnay, Petit Castel – and Castel Grand Vin

Flam Winery, Kfar Ginton, near Ben-Gurion Airport

Wines: Flam Classico, Reserve Merlot, Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon

Hamasrek Winery, Beit Meir, in the Jerusalem Mountains

Wines: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Chardonnay

Margalit Winery, Hadera Forest

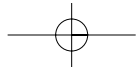
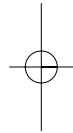
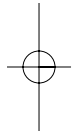
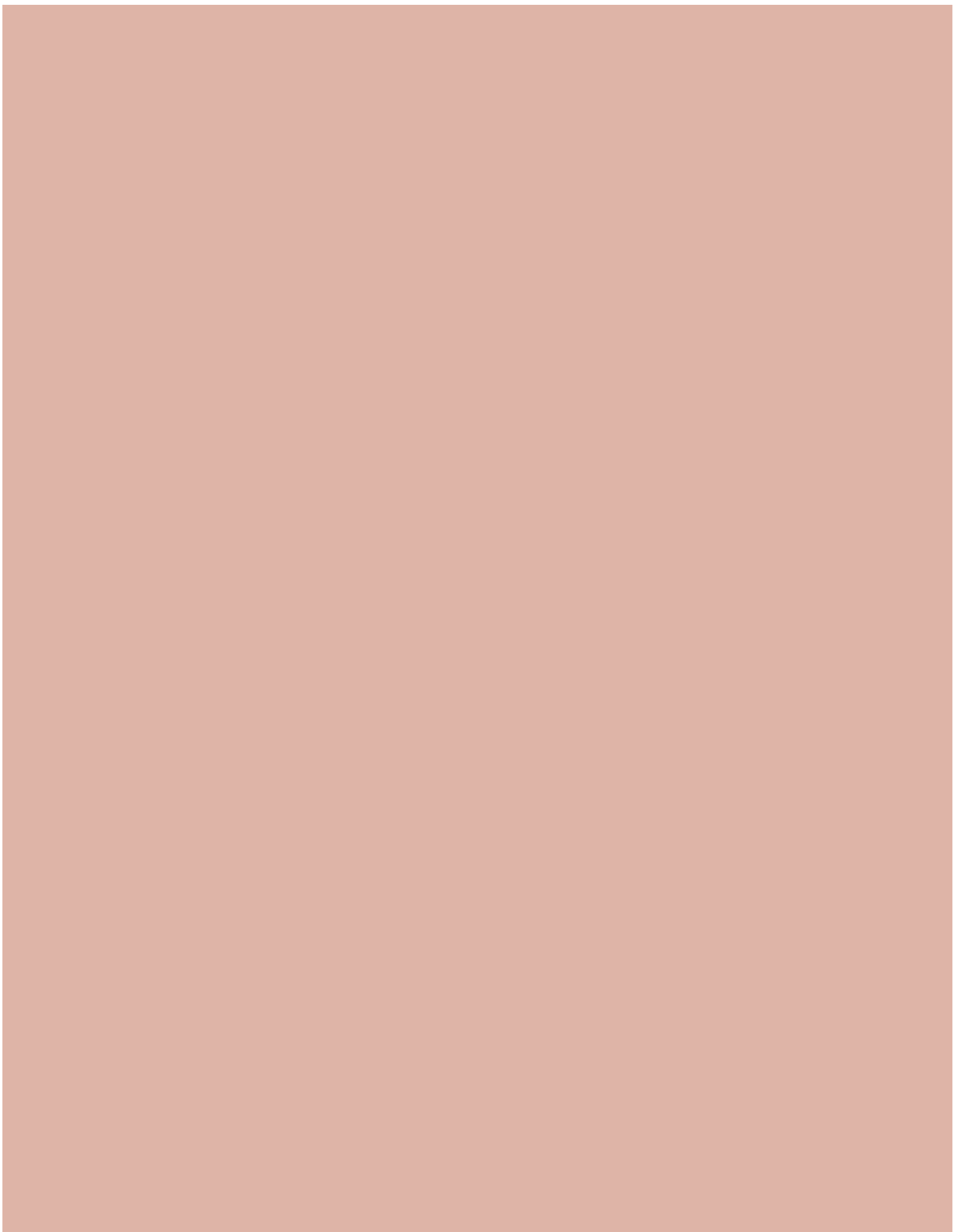
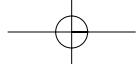
Wines: Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Sauvignon Special Reserve

Saslove Winery, Kibbutz Ayal, near Kfar Saba

Wines: Aviv Cabernet Sauvignon, Adom Cabernet Sauvignon, Reserved Cabernet Sauvignon

Yatir Winery, Tel Arad

Wines: Yatir Forest, Merlot, Cabernet Merlot



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Above:
The Binyamina Winery

Good Shopping

1. Special Reserve, 87 Hanasi Ave., Haifa
2. Super Drink, 47 Ussishkin St., Ramat Hasharon
3. Mandel, 218 Ben Yehuda St., Tel Aviv
4. Wine Depot, 33 Habarzel St.,
Ramat Hahayal, Tel Aviv
5. Derech Hayayin, 93 Hashmonaim St., Tel Aviv
6. Gafen, 42 Emek Refaim St., Jerusalem,
7. Naftaly, 93 Sokolov St., Ramat Hasharon,
8. Vino Cigar, First Floor, Azrieli Center, Tel Aviv,
9. Naftaly, New Shopping Center, Eilat
10. Wine Center, 117 Trumpeldor St., Beersheba

Tempranillo, and many more. The future will tell which of them is going to be most suitable for Israel's soil, climate, and wine-makers.

The Revolution

In a relatively short period of time, there has been a real wine revolution in Israel, which has evolved from a producer of simple, sweet sacramental (kiddush) wines to a respected presence on the international wine markets. Grape cultivation and harvesting methods are now professional and scientific. Stainless steel tanks and computer-controlled fermentation equipment have replaced rudimentary concrete containers. French and American oak barrels are increasingly being used to improve wine quality and longevity. Automatic bottling machines are fill-

ing more bottles with better and healthier wines. The more recently made wines are produced from grapes cultivated in conditions that are closer to organic, and the winemaking process has been improved and is more hygienic with every harvest due to the introduction of new and modern equipment.

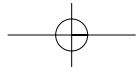
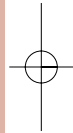
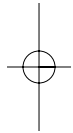
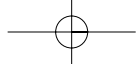
It is estimated that Israel is producing around 30 million bottles of wine per year, with some 20% of the wine being sold for export. (Production and export figures are approximate, since no winery will disclose its real figures.)

Israeli wine-makers, with characteristic ingenuity, have acquired a worldwide reputation; their wines aren't just kosher, they're excellent by any standards, and appreciated as such. They often win prizes in international wine tastings and competitions.

The country boasts no less than 120 wineries – large, industrialized, and modern establishments, medium-size commercial enterprises, and small home or garage outfits, most of which use the “boutique” label. The largest and oldest winery in Israel is Carmel, in Rishon Lezion, Zichron Yaakov, and Yatir (in partnership with local vintners), followed by Barkan in Kibbutz Hulda and the village of Barkan, the Golan Heights Winery in Katzrin, Galil Mountain in Kibbutz Yiron (in partnership with local vintners), Efrat in Moza, Binyamina in the village of Binyamina, and Dalton in the Dalton industrial area in the northern part of Galilee. The rest range from commercial “boutiques” with an average output of 50,000 bottles, to the very small ones, producing no more than 1,000 bottles per year.

Israeli wines, which won renown thousands of years ago, are now making a real comeback, regaining their biblical splendor. They have collected hundreds of prizes all over the world. To borrow an old slogan, you don't have to be Jewish to love Israeli wines. ■

Michael Ben-Joseph is an accredited wine master, lecturer, and author of four books on wine, the latest of which, The Bible of Israeli Wines, has been published in English. His columns appear regularly in Ma'ariv, Cigar Magazine and The Jerusalem Post.



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"If by a miracle, an inhabitant of ancient Palestine – say a subject of Hezekiah, King of Judah, a contemporary of the Prophet Isaiah – were to pay us a visit, many things would amaze him: the cars, the airplanes, etc., etc. Joining us at the dinner table, he would no doubt be surprised to find out that the average yearly wine consumption per capita in modern Israel is as little as 4.2 liters."

From Wine in Ancient Palestine, by Prof. Magen Broshi. (Israel's annual per capita consumption of wine is actually around 6 liters.)

"Two years ago, I tasted some Israeli wine and I was impressed; how can they produce such an exceptional wine in their hot climate?"

The legendary Robert Mondavi at the Golan Heights wine seminar.



Holiday Gift Package, Tabor

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The Binyamina Winery

The Binyamina Winery was founded in 1952. The building that currently houses the winery's visitors' center was originally a perfume factory established by Baron James de Rothschild in 1925. In 1992, a group of private investors purchased the winery and invested millions of sheqels in specialized technology to enable the production of fine wines. In addition, the winery invests in its raw materials, the grapes, by offering special bonuses to vineyards across the country that grow quality grapes. The Binyamina Winery works with a wide range of varietals to produce wines that suit the individual taste of each wine lover.

Carmel Mizrachi

The Carmel Mizrachi Winery is the largest in Israel, attracting 50% of the domestic market. It is also the biggest exporter. However, with an influx of new, young Australian-trained winemakers, three new state-of-the-art boutique wineries, and attentive management of its quality vineyards in the cool, high-altitude areas of the Upper Galilee and the Judean Hills, Carmel has begun to function in the same manner as a small winery – paying attention to the *terroir* and character of the vineyard. Wines such as the new Yatir Forest (Southern Judean Hills), Ramat Arad Cabernet Sauvignon (Northern Negev) and Zarit Cabernet Sauvignon (Upper Galilee) are evidence of a new Carmel.

Golan Heights Winery

The Golan Heights Winery produces premium varietals, proprietary blends, and traditional-method sparkling wines, marketed under the labels Yarden, Gamla, and Golan. It was founded in 1983 and is located in the small town of Katzrin, high up on the Golan Heights. By combining state-of-the-art technology with traditional vinification techniques, the company has succeeded in producing award-winning wines, firmly placing Israel on the international wine map. The winery is a company co-owned by four kibbutzim and four moshavim. The chief winemaker is Victor Schoenfeld, a graduate of the University of California at Davis.

Handcrafted

One of the most interesting developments in the wine industry is the formation of a consortium of the finest Israeli boutique and small wineries under the banner Handcrafted Wines of Israel. The winemakers in the group were trained in a variety of places, including France, Italy, Australia, and California. The wineries in the consortium are: Amphorae Vineyard, Bazelet Hagolan, Chillag Wine, Domaine du Castel, Flam Winery, Margalit Winery, Saslove Winery, Tzora Vineyards, and Yatir Winery. The consortium aims to promote Israel's image as a producer of quality wine. Handcrafted Wines of Israel is representative of the best of both the variety and quality of Israel's wine industry.

Tabor

Located in the Eastern Galilee, the Tabor Winery is conducting a fruitful dialogue with nature that results in a variety of original Israel wines. Tabor's wines can be used to accompany a festive meal or simply make a lazy afternoon more enjoyable. The Tabor Winery's unique geographic location, land, and climate all come together to create excellent wine. Tabor grows Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. There is a visitors' center, museum and shop, restaurant, and bar on the winery's premises and guided tours and tastings can be arranged for groups.

