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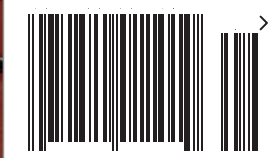
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The Changing Style of Israeli Wine

Producers in this ancient region look to the past and future to create thoroughly modern wines.

BY MIKE DeSIMONE

While the history of winemaking in Israel stretches back millennia, its modern industry has really hit its stride in just the past several years.

White wines have improved vastly in quality. Rhône varieties and hybrid grapes are edging out Cabernet blends. Indigenous grapes are starting to find commercial success. And winemakers who traveled abroad have returned more open to experimentation.

A new generation has taken the reigns from the forward-thinking winemakers who preceded them, and as a result, a wave of innovation has taken root in this diverse and vibrant Mediterranean country. This approach will likely guide the progress of Israel's wine industry through the 21st century. Here are the trends to watch.

White Wine

Seventy percent of the wine grapes grown in Israel are red, with Cabernet Sauvignon leading the way. However, the thirst for Israeli white wine both at home and abroad is growing.

"It's like somebody flipped a switch and said, 'Wow, we live in a hot country, we really should be drinking cold white wine,'" says Joshua Greenstein, an executive vice president of the Israel Wine Producers Association trade group.

Freshness and acidity are key, so the best examples are from high-altitude vineyards. Besides Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, there are very good examples of Gewürztraminer made by producers that include Psagot Winery, Jezreel Valley Winery, Tabor Winery and Golan Heights Winery.

Rhône-style whites like Recanati's Special Reserve white blend and Netofa's Roussanne have also made inroads.





Vineyards in the Negev desert

Rhône-Style Reds

“Mediterranean varieties are the most suitable for our climate and terroir,” says Gil Shatsberg, executive vice president of Recanati. “Early ripening grapes with the ability to maintain natural acidity in a hot climate offer a great advantage to making quality wines which match perfectly to our local cuisine.”

This includes both blends and varietal bottlings of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre. High-quality examples of Syrah/Shiraz come from producers such as Ramot Naftaly Winery, Pelter Winery, Binyamina Winery, Shiloh Winery and Tulip Winery, while blends are a mainstay at Jezreel Valley Winery, Hayotzer and Dalton Winery.



Clockwise from above: the hills of Gush Etzion; Cabernet grapes at harvest from Gush Etzion Winery; a sign for Golan Heights Winery in one of its vineyards

Boutique Wineries

The four largest producers—Barkan Wine Cellars, Carmel Winery, Teperberg Winery and Golan Heights Winery—make up almost half of Israel’s output of 40 to 45 million bottles per year. However, since the late 1970s, there has been incremental growth in proprietor-run craft wineries, which produce up to 30,000 bottles per year.

Dr. Yair Margalit, who founded Margalit Winery in 1989, is considered the father of Israel’s small-winery movement. These producers focus on quality, terroir and expression. There’s also much experimentation in winemaking techniques, proprietary blends and grape varieties. Small producers like Kishor Winery, Agur Winery, Shvo Vineyards, Alexander Winery, Ephod Winery, Nadiv Winery, Odem Mountain Winery and Gush Etzion Winery are racing to the top of Israel’s wine scene.

Vines in the Desert

One of the driest wine regions in the world, Israel’s Negev (Hebrew for “dry”) first produced grapes about 2,500 years ago, grown by the Nabateans, a nomadic tribe who built stone dams to divert infrequent rains to their vineyards.

Home to almost 40 wineries, this arid landscape wedged between Egypt and Jordan offers altitudes as high as 2,950 feet, which provide cold nights that preserve acidity.

One of the region’s leaders is Yatir Winery, founded in 2000 as a partnership between local growers and Carmel Winery. Its red wines are surprisingly bright, considering the vineyards’ topography and climate.

Another standout is Midbar, the Hebrew word for “desert.” Winemaker Shachar Landman coaxes extraordinary levels of freshness out of parched soils for his red and white blends.

Native Grapes

Israeli winemakers cultivate ancient indigenous varieties like Marawi, Bittuni, Jandali, Baladi and Dabouki, long thought extinct. Recent discoveries by researchers like Elyashiv Drori of Ariel University have led to their rediscovery and propagation.

Cremisan Winery, on the border of Israel and the West Bank, is one of the foremost producers of wines from native grapes. Sales of these wines benefit the Salesian Monks. Its winemaking team is made up of Italian monks under the watchful eye of consultant Riccardo Cotarella.

Ido Lewinsohn, MW, head winemaker at Barkan Segal, also works with Marawi, while Teperberg Winery uses the native variety Dabouki in its Inspire White.

Experimentation

After their compulsory military service, many Israelis travel abroad for a year before they come home and settle into a career. Those interested in winemaking find much to discover in Europe, the United States and Australia, and return home eager to experiment with new grapes or fermentation techniques.

Yehuda Nahar, CEO and winemaker at Jezreel Valley Winery, produces wine made from Argaman, a cross of Souzao and Carignan.

Argaman, which means “crimson” in Hebrew, was created by Israeli



From above: Carignan in a Recanati vineyard; Golan Heights vineyards



agronomists to produce a deeply colored wine, often added to inexpensive blends. However, Nahar and a few likeminded compatriots have made high-quality blends and varietal bottlings with the grape.

At Segal, Lewinsohn has introduced methods like whole-cluster and native-yeast fermentation. While these techniques represent the traditional way of making wine, they had gone by the wayside as wine-making became an industrialized process.

Wines with a Mission

More and more consumers want to support brands that give back to the community, a trend not lost on the Israeli wine sector. Two exemplary wineries are Kishor and Tulip, both of which support those with special needs.

Kishor is located in the Kibbutz Kishorit, a community for special-needs adults. Members of the kibbutz are employed year-round, and a dedicated team is brought in for the harvest season. Kishor's tasting room features cheese and baked goods made by community members.

Tulip winery was founded in Kfar Tikva, the "Village of Hope," home to adults with developmental and emotional disabilities. The residents participate and work in the winery, especially in the harvest and labeling of the bottles. Both wineries produce a variety of white and red wines.

Sustainability

At the forefront is Golan Heights Winery. In 2017, its vineyards became the first in Israel to become certified for sustainable winegrowing. The winery's barrel cellars, bottled wine warehouse and bottling hall are covered in solar panels. The winery claims that two-thirds of its energy usage is derived from the sun.

Tabor Winery, under the direction of its general manager and head agronomist, Michal Akerman, has worked to reintroduce wildlife into its vineyard in order to restore the ecosystem with the use of sustainable growing methods. The winery's new logo features a barn owl, which symbolizes the return of a variety of wild animals and their importance to the quality of the soil.

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