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Israeli wine is the real thing

Despite confusion over their 'kosher' status, Israel's wines are hitting the global market with a new breed of smaller producers, reports **Graham Sherwood**

FEW WINE writers will admit to a lack of knowledge about a particular type of wine – so let me 'out' myself immediately and say I cannot, before researching this article, remember drinking an Israeli wine. I do suspect, however, that I am not alone.

One of the main reasons for this is the strong association that Israeli wines have with both the religious and ceremonial aspects of the Jewish faith. Many outsiders, perhaps like myself, may have had the view that Israeli wine, much of which is 'kosher', was not for them and made mostly for home consumption.

While the issue of being kosher still remains, Israeli wines are striking out to the global market with a new breed of boutique wineries that are attempting to show just how good their wines really are.

Historically, the land that is now called Israel is often cited as one of the 'cradles of civilization', one of the birthplaces of man's agricultural and urban development.

Modern-day Israel occupies the land described in the Bible as 'flowing with milk and honey', such being the fertility and promise of the region and its ability to produce wine: "Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard" (Genesis 9,



A typical Galilean breakfast

20-21). While many areas in Israel are undoubtedly capable of producing grapes to make wine, the specific 'terroirs' required for fine wines need to have been identified, often by trial and error, to match the characteristics of the ever-increasing range of classic grape varieties used to make the best wines possible.

There are sites of viticultural promise in the Judean Hills and the Carmel Valley, although Israel's finest wine region is arguably Galilee, particularly at the higher, cooler elevations around the Colan Heights. Some of these areas are already well known in the UK, mainly via the news and for all the wrong reasons.

However, another war-torn area of the Middle East, the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, has already proved that great wines can be made in spite of political upheaval.

The iconic Chateau Musar stands out as a beacon for the region, so much should be expected of Israel's prime

vineyard sites. Although considered tiny in global wine production terms, Israel attracted attention recently with the acclaimed American wine guru Robert Parker giving a very creditable score of 91 points or more (in the highly-regarded Wine Advocate publication) to 23 wineries. This level of respect can do nothing but elevate Israel on to a higher level of consideration among the world's wine cognoscenti.

Ironically, although considering themselves definitely Old World in winemaking terms, the newly emerging Israeli boutique wineries will get New World recognition for their innovative efforts. Many of the so-called

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Judean Hills: Treating wine at the Castel Winery

'international' wine grape varieties have proved successful in Israel's better vineyard sites since the quality revolution of the Eighties. Among them, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Chardonnay and even Gewurztraminer are thriving and, significantly, several members of the extensive Muscat grape family, which has historical links with this part of the world, are also to be found.

Production statistics for 2012 show that the Israeli wine industry produces an average of 36 million bottles annually in a variety of styles including red, white, rosé, still, sparkling and dessert wines. Exports are also on the rise with grape-based alcoholic beverages up eight per cent in 2012 over the previous year, totalling \$30m (£19m). In 2013, 42 million bottles were expected to be produced, 77 per cent of them red wines.

There are now 35 commercial wineries in Israel, and more than 250 boutique wineries. The ten largest wineries in terms of production volume are Carmel, Barkan, Golan Heights, Teperberg 1870, Binyamina Wine Cellar, Galil Mountain, Tishbi Winery, Tabor, Recanati and Dalton Winery, with 75 per cent of the nationwide production coming from only the top five producers. Therefore it is easy to see the task ahead of the smaller boutique producers.

Marketing these new Israeli wines will perhaps be the biggest challenge of all and this is where we must return to the issue of kosher. First of all, what does kosher mean for wine?

Kosher foods and wines are those that



A Golan Heights vineyard

conform to the regulations of kashrut, the Jewish dietary law, and may be consumed according to halakha, Jewish law and termed kosher in English, meaning 'fit' (to eat or drink).

So for a wine to be considered kosher it has to contain only kosher ingredients or fining agents such as isinglass, gelatine or casein and, according to traditional Jewish law, once the grapes are picked and brought in to be crushed, only Shabbat-observant Jews can be involved in making the wine. From crushing to bottling, therefore, kosher wine must be handled exclusively by observant Jews.

However, if a wine is mullled or pasteurised (a process called mevushal) it may subsequently be handled by anyone without losing its kosher status. While not

all Israeli wine is kosher, virtually all the country's large producers have kosher certification.

Speaking as someone who is a novice where Israeli wines are concerned, I would make the following observations. First, the samples that were sent to me for appraisal (shown below) were absolutely wonderful and, tasted blind with members of a very experienced local wine society, acquitted themselves handsomely, often fooling the tasters into thinking they were from other well known, more prestigious wine regions.

However, once revealed, the matter of kosher, its complicated provenance and its relevance to the wider wine drinking public proved to be an unwanted complication to their overall appraisal of the wines tasted.

Plainly, the newly emerging wines of Israel can achieve a quality level commensurate with some of the best of both the New and Old World wine countries.

However, as most of the current production finds an easy market among those of the Jewish faith worldwide, especially those in the USA, I feel that newer markets will require sufficient education to be able to enjoy these promising new wines without the confusion that being kosher – or, more significantly, mevushal – brings to their overall enjoyment.

