

FOOD

Jeff Morgan transformed himself from professional musician to producer of some of the world's best kosher wines. It's been an emotional journey

A wine-maker's tale (tears included)

BY VICTORIA PREVER

INE CAN lead men to ruin. It led Jeff Morgan to religion.

Morgan makes what Robert Park-

er — one of the world's most the most respected and well-know wine critics — has described as "the best kosher wine in the US". His wines are served in world-famous restaurants, such as The French Laundry, Spago and Chicago's Trump Tower.

But although he was born Jewish, neither Judaism nor wine featured heavily in Morgan's early life.

His initial career path followed a passion for music. He dropped out of college and left New York (where he had grown up) to study flute at the French National Conservatory. This led to him playing the saxophone and fronting the band at the Grand Casino in Monte Carlo.

Sounds glamorous, but it wasn't. "Every night was like a bad wedding," he says. "I eventually decided that I hated my life. I needed to do something I loved and what I loved as much as music was wine."

Not believing that any French wine-maker worth his grapes would take an American musician seriously, he headed back to New York where he persuaded a small winery on Long Island to take him on. "I got a job as a cellar guy and learned the business from the ground up," he says.

While working at the winery he started submitting articles on wine to various publications, including the *New York Times*. "Funally enough, my first commission for the *Wine Spectator* in 1993 was on kosher wines for Passover. I got the commission because I was Jewish. But that was the first time I realised there could be some really good kosher wines," he smiles.

It was another decade before he decided to make them himself.

He continued to write as a freelancer, before becoming West Coast editor of the *Wine Spectator* in 1995. In 1999 he became wine director for Dean and DeLuca, the high-end US gourmet food emporium. He later wrote the *Dean and DeLuca Food and Wine Cookbook*, one of four books on food and wine he has written with his wife Jodie.

It was not until 2000 that he got the bug to produce wine again. He



Morgan begged friends for help in starting up his vineyard in California's Napa Valley

'THE GREATEST KOSHER WINE I'VE EVER TASTED'

► JEFF Morgan is responsible for Covenant Cabernet Sauvignon, widely regarded as the greatest kosher wine made in the United States — and sometimes the world. It is certainly the greatest kosher wine I have ever tasted. So he seemed an ideal person to answer questions about kosher wine-making.

The first concerned pricing. Kosher wines are often relatively expensive, and I assumed that the wine-making requirements accounted for the extra cost.

Not necessarily, says Morgan. There are

additional expenses, such as paying the local certifying rabbinate and buying equipment to perform mechanised operations automatically on Shabbat. But they are not that important.

Keeping kosher in the winery, he went on, is less about expense than inconvenience. Finding Sabbath-observant Jews who know their way around fermentation tanks and barrel cellars — that's a problem. Many holy days fall in the winemaking season — that's a problem.

Morgan says that these are "the greatest challenges". He wonders "what

God was thinking" when He made those scheduling decisions.

My other big question was about mevushal — wine that is flash-pasteurised so that it can be handled after bottling by gentiles, such as staff in restaurants. Covenant's wines are not mevushal, and I wondered if Morgan thought that wines that underwent the pasteurisation process were inherently inferior. Not at all, he says.

"Some are very good. The issue is not whether mevushal is bad. The issue is, why jeopardise the wine using an unnecessary technique?"

Morgan would rather avoid that intervention, out of a respect bordering on reverence for the Napa Valley grapes he uses. And I suspect that using the method would not do his wines any favours if he did.

Covenant Cab — and some of their four other wines — can be found at retailers such as www.kosherwineuk.com and www.kosherwinecellar.co.uk. It is definitely not cheap, at £80-85. But it is kosher, despite the difficulties. And it's really, really wonderful.

Spurge and find out for yourself.

RICHARD EHRLICH

started with his own non-kosher rosé, Solo Rosa, before a series of events set Morgan, still at that time very much a secular Jew, on the path to making kosher wine and to celebrating a belated barmitzvah at 44 years of age.

He was a close friend of Leslie Rudd — the founder of Dean and DeLuca — also Jewish and similarly non-practising. Both had grown up drinking the sweet and sticky Manischewitz — the US equivalent of Palwins Kiddush wine — on Shabbat. To Rudd, that pretty much was kosher wine.

Both were attending at a synagogue fund-raiser, when Rudd asked Morgan why there were not more great kosher wines.

"I told him I'd found some when I was writing and that with the right grapes, I could make a great kosher wine," Morgan recalls. "I begged him to let me have some of his vineyard's cabernet sauvignon grapes to make it with." However, Rudd — worried that if the wine did not live up to expectation, the grapes would have his name on them — was less keen.

"He did offer to back me though and it's expensive to make cabernet sauvignon in Napa," says Morgan, whose next hurdle was learning how to actually make kosher wine.

"For the wine to be kosher, I needed a crew who were shomer Shabbat" he explains "and the only crew I could think of were at Herzog Wine Cellars in southern California.

"I knew Nathan Herzog from my wine writing days so I asked him to dinner. I surprised myself by crying as I was asking for his help — it had come to mean that much to me," he says. Herzog agreed and Covenant Wine was born.

"For the first four years of production, I drove the grapes to the Herzog Winery to be processed," says Morgan. But in 2007 he hired Jonathan Hadju — a former Herzog cellar worker — as his associate wine producer. Hadju is his *meshgiach* (kashrut supervisor), enabling Morgan to make the wine at his own premises.

During his association with Herzog, he noticed that the staff held morning and afternoon prayers around the fermentation tanks. So impressed was Morgan that he set out to teach himself Hebrew. By 2007, he had learned enough to celebrate his barmitzvah.

He now has a kosher kitchen at his Napa family home and puts on teffilin daily. He and his team do not work during Shabbat or religious holidays. Harvesting can be a challenge when they have to down tools for several days a week.

Religious thread runs through operation: the label Covenant is obvious as is the play on words that make another of his labels — The Red C. His label designs are inspired by Chagall's paintings.

Morgan's approach to wine-making also involves a huge element of fun. "My new label and the name of the wine club we have started on the Covenant website is 'Landsman' which Yiddish for fellow Jew. Our slogan is "Be a Landsman - join the club", he smiles with a twinkle in his eye. "If we aren't having fun, then what's the point?"

www.covenantwines.com