

Boutique revolution puts Israeli wines on world map

By [Afp](#)

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In the rolling pine-covered hills west of Jerusalem, winemaker Eran Pick checks on the vines he cultivates, plying an ancient trade which has been common to the area since biblical times.

"For 3,000 years wine has been produced in these hills," says Pick, 40, who is trained in a mix of New and Old World winemaking and worked in California and Bordeaux before joining Tzora Vineyards.

Established in 1993, Tzora was one of Israel's first boutique wineries -- defined as those which produce fewer than 100,000 bottles per year.



An Israeli Arab farmer harvests cabernet sauvignon grapes for the Bazelet Hagolan Winery at Kidmat Tzvi in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights on September 20, 2012 ©Menahem Kahana (AFP/File)

"We have renewed this tradition in order to make a typically Israeli wine which will be at the level of the world's best wines," he says.

The vineyard produces 80,000 bottles annually, of which 15,000 are sold abroad.

Its output accounts for just a fraction of the 40 million bottles Israel produces each year from its 350 wineries, the vast majority of which are boutique enterprises.

Sales of Israeli wines bring in between \$300 and \$350 million per year, around 10 percent of which comes from overseas exports, according to wine expert Gabriel Geller.

The main importers are the United States, Britain and France.

According to French wine expert Marc Dworkin, Israel is "a small country where each wine-producing region is more interesting than the last."

Geller says the quality of Israeli wines has changed markedly in recent years.

"It's a slow process but one that is constantly growing," he says.

"In recent years Israeli wines have been winning competitions all over the world."

- Pioneered by Rothschild -

Wine has been produced in the Holy Land for millennia but local production underwent a revival at the end of the 19th century, thanks to Baron Edmond James de Rothschild, a French Jewish billionaire philanthropist who owned the iconic Chateau Lafite in Bordeaux.

Rothschild planted the first major modern vineyard at Rishon LeTzion near Tel Aviv in 1882, establishing the Carmel Winery, which today produces more than 25 million bottles a year and holds a major share of the domestic market.

A century later, the Golan Heights Winery was founded. With the help of international experts, the winery began to innovate, shifting away from Israel's image as a producer of sweet wines for use in religious rites.

Within a decade, as Israelis began travelling overseas more frequently, getting a taste for French and Italian gastronomy and wine, the first boutique wineries were set up, although by the turn of the century, there were only about a dozen.

Today, Israel boasts more than 320 boutique establishments.

"Wine culture has grown in Israel with the boutique wineries boom, so many Israelis decided to open their own," Geller explains.

"It has also become a sort of trend among foreign investors and businessmen to own a winery, so many Jewish millionaires, mainly Americans, have either acquired part or full ownership in such ventures."

- 'Taste of this land' -

In the Jerusalem area alone, dozens of wineries have recently sprung up. One of them is Flam, a family business started in 1998 by two brothers with an annual production of 100,000 bottles.

Perched on top of a hill with stunning views, the winery hosts tasting sessions, with sample produce accompanied by platters of cheese and fresh bread.

"We want to develop a taste among Israelis for good wine, so that they cannot do without it," owner Gilad Flam says.

Although far behind Italy or France in terms of consumption, surveys show that the number of Israelis drinking wine regularly has doubled over the past five years.

Even so, the average consumption of wine per person in Israel stands at about 6-7 litres per year, compared with around 45 litres in France.

Israeli wines are similar to those from other New World wine countries and tend to be made with classic French and Italian grapes with very few made from local varieties.

Although kosher wines account for the lion's share of exports, around 60 percent of Israel's boutique wineries are not kosher, although their products are often inadvertently sidelined, Geller says.

"The main problem is that Israeli bottles can often end up in the stores on the kosher shelf," he explains.

"A customer who doesn't need to buy kosher could therefore miss it."

Flam, who produces seven different labels, says he wants to create a wine that is uniquely Israeli.

"We are not copying the wines of Bordeaux or of Italy but creating a high-quality Israeli wine," he says.

"The growing conditions are excellent and we are trying to get the taste of this land in every bottle."

During US President Barack Obama's visit to Israel in 2013, Flam wines were served at a state dinner hosted by then Israeli president Shimon Peres.

"When we taste the wines of Flam and sometimes of wineries less well-known to the general public we realise the enormous potential of Israeli wine," Geller says.

For the two brothers, this is no small achievement.

"We have managed to put Israel on the global wine list," Flam says.



Yoav Levy, owner and winemaker at Bazelet Hagolan Winery, tastes his 2011 Merlot in the winery's cellar in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights on September 20, 2012 ©Menahem Kahana (AFP/File)



A religious Jew processes just-harvested cabernet sauvignon grapes for the Bazelet Hagolan Winery at Kidmat Tzvi in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights on September 20, 2012 ©Menahem Kahana (AFP/File)



Israeli Arab farmers harvest cabernet sauvignon grapes for the Bazelet Hagolan Winery at Kidmat Tzvi in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights on September 20, 2012 ©Menahem Kahana (AFP/File)



An Israeli Arab farmer harvests cabernet sauvignon grapes for the Bazelet Hagolan Winery at Kidmat Tzvi in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights on September 20, 2012 ©Menahem Kahana (AFP/File)



Religious Jews process just-harvested cabernet sauvignon grapes for the Bazelet Hagolan Winery at Kidmat Tzvi in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights on September 20, 2012 ©Menahem Kahana (AFP/File)