

Finding the perfect balance

Israel's winemaking story may have begun thousands of years ago, but today the country faces a difficult task to catch up with its Mediterranean rivals. Psagot Winery is up for the challenge



Left An ancient Judean winery, rejuvenated as Psagot's first barrel room



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Israel is both one of the oldest and newest winemaking countries in the world: a global leader of quality wine thousands of years ago, a young and identity-searching industry in the present. But the challenges it faces are many: a hot climate, limited rainfall, a lack of indigenous wine grapes, local consumers that rarely drink wine – and, when they do, mainly for sacramental purposes – and a world that, in general, is not familiar with Israeli wine. Collectively, these factors did not create the easiest starting point for Psagot Winery. Despite this, our wines are getting more and more recognition, awards and positive reviews. Winemaking to us is not an ongoing tradition, but rather an attempt to rejuvenate an ancient one.

An inspired vision

Before we began our long-term planning, we first came up with a vision. At Psagot, this vision was clear from the start. When planting our first vineyard, we discovered an ancient cave nearby. When this cave was excavated, a 2,000-year-old ancient winery was found, alongside a coin dated to the second year of the Great Revolt (68AD). This deeply inspired our founder, Yaakov Berg, to try and revive the ancient prestige once held by the area as a superior wine-growing region. In reality, it meant starting from nothing. There was

no blueprint to follow regarding which grapes to choose, how to grow them or what wines to make from them. So we simply got to work, learning from trial and error along the way.

When they wanted to generate international sales for their wines, traditional Old World countries (such as Italy, Greece and others) relied on what came to be called 'international varieties', which are in fact French grape varieties. These include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, to mention a few. So, when rejuvenating a barren land without your own indigenous wine grapes, this is clearly the best place to start.

Grape expectations

One will struggle to make long-term plans when accumulative knowledge of wine growing and winemaking in the region is so sparse. So you start with short-term plans. You select grape varieties that are known and appreciated, and you set out to make the best wine you can. At Psagot, this was done by using international varieties, starting with small-scale production and evaluating the results. Fortunately, they were hugely promising: sales grew gradually and consistently, and we slowly started to understand what was happening, how to deal with any challenges and even how to allow our *terroir*, or environment, to express itself.

In hot climates, sugar levels increase at a faster pace than the rate at which aromas and flavours develop. So if you seek ripeness, you will end up with a lot of sugar content in the grapes, resulting in high-alcohol wine. We learned that leaner soils and limestone bedrock slow the pace of the ripen-

ing process, allowing the aromas and flavours to catch up, thereby generating sugar levels suitable for dry table wines. At Psagot, therefore, we keep our vineyards at the mountain peaks and not in the richer valley soils. By locating our vineyards a considerable distance from the Mediterranean sea, where temperatures drop fast, we can slow the plant's metabolic breathing, allowing more acid to remain in the grape, while keeping the wines fresh and lively.

Wines from all over the world are generally made in a similar way, although this is only true to an extent. Taking a closer look, there are many details that can affect your wine, including the temperature of fermentation, length of maceration, methods of ageing and other factors. In truth, these considerations are not only regional, as the nature of your fruit can differ from vineyard to vineyard as well. At Psagot, we are gaining a better understanding of how to process our fruit every day. In general, we are located in one of Israel's greatest growing areas, with fruit that can produce big wines with intense flavours. In our region, our wines must be carefully monitored to ensure that the results are not overwhelming; we are learning to tame the beasts, as it were. So we ferment at cool temperatures, keep macerations and tannin extraction relatively short, and we are gradually shortening the periods of barrel ageing for some of our wines. Altogether, we are reaching a more elegant style in our portfolio.

There is not much you can do about the hot climate of a region, yet you can learn to work with it. One of the most crucial decisions in winemaking is deciding when to harvest. You don't want to

harvest when underripe, nor overripe. In a hot climate, you are always facing a conflict of interests: if you harvest early to keep your alcohol level moderate, you might not have enough ripeness. If you wait too long, your alcohol levels may end up too high. It is always a compromise. At Psagot, we try to get the best of both worlds. We don't harvest the entire vineyard at once, but instead harvest multiple times in the same vineyard. Early harvests provide freshness and low alcohol, later harvests provide fruitiness and a full array of aromas and flavours – the combination of the two results in a full, yet balanced and elegant wine.

Glass half full

The winery has established itself gradually over many years. Its reputation grew, as did recognition of the *terroir* and the nature of the big wines coming out of it. Sales steadily increased each year until production reached 120 times the volume of the first year. Sales are international, and 65 percent of our produce is exported. Years after focusing on short-term plans alone, we can finally start thinking about our long-term goals, which can now be shaped by our accumulated knowledge and the experience we have gained.

The issues we must deal with are complex. We have to navigate a market in which critics are looking for a style of wine that is different from that which consumers seem to like and buy. We also have to make difficult decisions regarding our portfolio of grapes. Deciding between internationally renowned, best-selling grapes, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, or Mediterranean varieties – which, although largely

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unknown, are better suited to our climate – is not easy. Assessing market trends is also challenging, particularly as it can take between seven and 10 years to perfect a new variety of wine – and, by that point, trends may have moved on.

Personally, I am not sure there is a methodical way to answer these challenges unless you shoot in all directions and hope some will hit the target. Even then, you lose an important ingredient for success in the wine world: your identity. The wine industry is so passion-driven that perhaps, when planning changes, you are permitted to be non-methodical. You are permitted to be driven by your heart and dreams too. Indeed, as problematic as that might sound, I believe it to be well-suited to an industry where we are all using largely the same grapes and similar technology, and we are all striving for appreciation from the same critics. It means that the results can become all too repetitive, lacking true personality. It is essential, therefore, that we encourage the wine enthusiast to look for identity in his glass of wine, not only fruit and soft tannins. Perhaps in the wine market, following your passion is not only permitted, but might even be necessary. The result will be a

wine imbued with identity and personality, and in a market driven by the passion of consumers, this can be your most valuable asset.

So, at Psagot, we take all the above into account. We combine our growing understanding of our *terroir*, of how to grow our vines and make our wines, and the tastes of our consumers. Yet we do not forget what brought us to this industry in the first place, so we allow our passion to guide us as well. And from our experience, accumulated knowledge and passion, we can finally start making our long-term plans. In order to not compromise our identity, we are focusing on making wine from our own *terroir*, despite the fact that sourcing grapes from all over Israel might result in added complexity.

A toast to the future

We are also focusing on expanding our white wine portfolio because white, refreshing wines are enjoyable to consume in a hot climate, despite the fact that red wines are probably more profitable. We have begun a sparkling wine project out of admiration for this regal style of wine, even though expenses are rather high. And we are focusing on our reds, gradually making them less robust and more complex and elegant, simply because we believe that this is the more sophisticated and communicative way a wine should express its region and all the efforts that go into growing and making it. We truly believe that the passion that guides us is the best way to make long-term success in the wine industry, and we hope consumers will also appreciate and enjoy the results of this approach. To them we say, *LeChaim!* ■