

Yaakov Berg didn't set out to make award-winning wines, but the Moscow native followed his passion with patience and, with a little Divine guidance, created a boutique winery that punches above its weight

fruitful Venture

BY *Refoel Pride*
PHOTOS *Ouria Tadmor*

"It started as a hobby,"

jokes Yaakov Berg, the personable but passionate founder and CEO of Psagot Boutique Winery as he surveys the sun-drenched view of the Nachal Prat valley from the dining room of his visitors' center. "And then it became a problem."

Psagot, a yishuv situated some 15 miles due north of Jerusalem in the Binyamin hills, has been home to Yaakov's winery since 2003. The intervening dozen years have seen the winery grow from an annual production of 3,000 bottles — mainly for family and friends — to last year's output of 250,000 bottles. Although that figure puts Berg's operation in the category of a "boutique winery" — by comparison, Carmel Wineries, Israel's biggest player, supplies 15 million bottles annually — Psagot punches above its weight in international competitions, consistently winning gold medals and earning the respect of oenophiles worldwide. Its latest entry, just in time for Shavuot, is a much-anticipated 2014 vintage white Voignier, harvested from an older section of the vineyard.

Through it all, Yaakov Berg has invested time, money, and no small amount of back-breaking labor to forge a personal connection with his customers and thereby close a circuit that runs through the Land of Israel, the wine it produces, and the mitzvos that bind the land to its people. It's an effort that seems to bear more and more fruit each passing year.

On a recent unseasonably warm day, Yaakov presided over a sumptuous meal at which his winery's flagship label, Psagot Edom, a blend of Cabernet

Sauvignon and Merlot, was decanted. (*Mishpacha* did not dispatch its staff oenologist on this assignment, so readers hoping for a lavish description of the wine's fruity nose, gently chewy tannins, or robust finish will instead have to suffice with this: It was really quite tasty.) During the meal and the tour that followed, Yaakov expounded on his vision for the winery, the challenges he faces, and how his life unfolded to bring him to this point.

A Cave and an Inspiration Yaakov was born in Russia, near Moscow, but made aliyah with his family in 1979 at the age of three.

“My parents made Zionist aliyah,” Yaakov says. “The people who came after the fall of Communism came for any number of reasons, but someone who came in 1979 was coming for ideological reasons.”

The Berg family landed initially in an absorption center in Jerusalem, and sojourning for a few years in the capital, before deciding upon the yishuv of Psagot as their permanent home. Yaakov's parents nevertheless put him on the bus back to the Holy City every day for cheder — he was enrolled in Talmud Torah Bayit V'gan, a long daily trip that skirted Ramallah and the Kalandia refugee camp, and traversed the entire length of Jerusalem.

“I used the whole bus ride to cheder to think up a story for my classmates about what happened to me on the way to school,” he recounts with a mischievous smile. “Every day it was someone different throwing rocks. When I walked in the door of the classroom, my *rebbeis* would

just ask me, ‘*Mah karah hayom, Yaakov?* [What happened today, Yaakov?].’”

After completing cheder and yeshivah Yaakov entered university in 1998 in pursuit of a law degree. During the course of his studies, the opportunity arose to study abroad for one year, in Australia. Ever the adventurous sort, Yaakov jumped at the chance.

In the course of filling out his term of university studies in the Land Down Under, he somehow found the time to help found a *kollel*. He also took a two-week side trip to New Zealand, a jaunt that took an unexpected twist worthy of an Ari and Ari story. The rabbi of the community he was visiting unfortunately had to leave the country for two weeks due to a family tragedy. He needed to find someone who could lead the shul in his absence — the average observance level of the *kehillah* precluded his tabbing a local replacement — and spied the young Israeli visitor, who seemed a likely candidate.

“He said to me, ‘You look like you know something.’” Yaakov recalls. “It was supposed to be a pleasure trip, but I ended up having to run the shul while he was gone.”

Ultimately, though, Yaakov's stay in Australia was to have two impacts of life-long significance: One was meeting his future wife, Naama, a fellow Israeli who was fulfilling the second year of her national service in Australia's Jewish community. The other was a trip through Australia's wine country. He was fascinated by it all — the chemistry of wine-making, the science of raising grapes, and of course, the end product.

While his larger rivals spent their time extolling the size of their production facilities and their cutting-edge technology, Yaakov used the opportunity to tell his audience the story of wine in the land of Israel

THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE
As they began construction of their home at the edge of the yishuv, the Bergs hit an ancient winepress — a foreshadowing of things to come

“That's when I knew wanted to go into wine-making,” he says.

Yaakov and Naama returned to Israel and married in 2000. Yaakov embarked on a law career specializing in construction and design contracts, and in torts. But his thoughts never strayed far from his dream of making wine, and his wife also eagerly took up the cause. (By Yaakov's estimation, his law degree was invaluable for turning his wine hobby into a livelihood: “In order to survive in business in this country, you *have* to be a lawyer.”)

When he and Naama settled in his boyhood home of Psagot, a vineyard at the edge of the yishuv became available, and the Bergs pounced on the opportunity. They purchased the land and set about cultivating the grapes, setting aside a portion on which to build their dream home. When construction began, they made an astounding discovery.

A tractor laying the roadbed for what would be their driveway suddenly found itself trapped; one of its wheels had sunk down into a deep hole. Upon extracting the tractor from its predicament, the Bergs discovered that the hole was an entrance to a cave under the property. Yaakov was determined to unearth the cave and uncover its secrets.

“My wife and I basically dug out the entire cave, spoon by spoon, over three months,” he explains.

Their hard work eventually revealed a cave dating to the Bayis Sheini era. It contained the remains of a wine press, typical for the period: a large round stone on the floor lay directly beneath a small hole carved into the ceiling.

Yaakov brings his guests to the unearthed cavern and shows how the harvested grapes were placed on the large stone on the floor. A similarly large stone was lowered, by means of a pole affixed to the hole in the ceiling, to crush the fruits and extract the juice, which flowed through a sluice into a stone pit hewn out of the floor. Except for the actual pressing stone and the pole, all these elements are still visible in the dim light cast by the halogen lamps.

What's more, the Bergs' digging yielded another startling find: a coin minted by Jews during the period of the uprising against Roman rule, just before the Second Beis Hamikdash was destroyed.

“In those days, the Romans stamped the face of the emperor on their coins,” Yaakov points out. “They wanted the coin to show a symbol of who was most important in their empire. So when the Jews made this coin, they wanted it to show a symbol of what was important to them.”

The coin that the Bergs found in their cave — which today serves as the Psagot Boutique Winery company logo — depicts a large, ornate wine vessel on one face, and on the reverse, the leaves of a grapevine.

“In those days, the symbol of Eretz Yisrael was wine,” Yaakov says.

It's a message that he delivers to as many people as will listen. He tells of a recent marketing trip to Texas that he made in conjunction with another leading Israeli winery. While his larger rivals spent their



“Yaakov, are you an idiot? In my family we define ourselves by the one acre of grand cru vines we own. It’s our identity. And you thought I was going to sell it?”

CELLAR SECRETS “The French didn’t bring wine into the world,” says Yaakov Berg. “We did. And what we’re trying to do is bring it back”

time extolling the size of their production facilities and their cutting-edge technology, Yaakov used the opportunity to tell his audience the story of wine in the land of Israel.

“When I stood up to talk, I asked them, ‘Do you know where the Roman Caesars brought their best wine from? From Israel!’” Recounting the story animates Yaakov’s spirit again, as he relives the moment. “It’s true that we only started to produce fine wines in the last 20 years, but Eretz Yisrael was known in ancient times as the best wine country in the world.”

Connected to the Land Finding the coin triggered an awareness in Yaakov and Naama Berg of the longstanding importance of wine in Jewish life, the link between wine making and the land of Israel, and the possibilities of broadcasting that message to the world.

“There is a deep connection between man and land and I really started to understand it through wine,” Yaakov reflects.

This concept was reinforced for him by his travels to France, the country the modern world judges to be the center of wine making. Yaakov’s education in oenology led him to the realization that to produce quality wines in these times, one must obtain barrels from France. The French have perfected the art of aging wine, and their barrels are considered the optimal receptacles for this critical stage of the process. (Ninety-five percent of Psagot’s barrels come from France.) Beyond mere technique, however, Yaakov learned something more important from his dealings with the French.

He recalls an encounter there with Pierre, an interlocutor who took him on a small tour of the Chablis region, reputed to produce the very finest Chardonnays



in the world. Pierre gave Yaakov a tutorial on *terroir*, the French science of the interplay among climate, soil chemistry, and tradition in the production of fine wine. Pierre explained to Yaakov that every bottle of wine in France is classified into one of several categories that indicate its quality. Chablis, for example, has four such designations, listed here in order from lowest quality to highest: *petit Chablis*, Chablis, *premier cru*, and *grand cru*. Pierre’s family, as it happened, owned one acre of vineyards classified as *grand cru*. (All of France has only 230 to 250 acres dedicated to *grand cru* Chablis.) And this appellation did not come about by the decree of Pierre’s family.

“It’s not like in Israel, where I in the winery can decide and I tell you this wine is the highest level, this is the lowest lev-

el,” Yaakov explains. “No. In France every piece of land is classified by the state law. The law on wine classification is a book like this [he gestures eight inches thick with his hands] while all the rest of the laws of France are like this [three inches apart]. And every piece of land is divided into those four levels. And this system is more than 200 years old, so this land was in Pierre’s family for a long time.”

Pierre took Yaakov on a tour of his holdings and evinced such pride that it got Yaakov to thinking — thinking along the lines that many readers may now be pondering.

“I am a Jew and an Israeli — you cannot do worse than that — so what was my first question I asked him?” Yaakov recounts with a smile. “I asked him, ‘Tell me, how much does it cost, one acre? I want to buy.’ And you know when you ask a question and you understand immediately that you made a big mistake? I didn’t understand what the problem was. So I pushed him. ‘What’s the problem? How much does it cost?’

“He said, after a while, ‘Yaakov, I think maybe 100,000 euro. For me, it would probably be much better to sell it than to make wine from it, but I’ll tell you the truth—in our area, I don’t remember that anybody sold their land. No one is going to sell a piece of land.’ I hold my head and say I don’t understand.

“He said, ‘Yaakov, are you an idiot? You come from Israel — everybody on earth wants the land there. How do you not understand? In my family we define ourselves by the one acre of *grand cru* vines we own. It’s our identity. And you thought I was going to sell it?’”

Yaakov of course already related to Eretz Yisrael this way as a religious Jew, but now he was beginning to see that wine making offered an additional way of understanding this spiritual reality.

“Really, I believe that if you can understand this concept with wine, then you can understand it in other areas as well,” he says. “Wine is only a symbol to us. We use it for Kiddush on Shabbos, Arba Kosos at Pesach, for *sheva brachos*, at a bris milah — but not as a drink, to be enjoyed for itself. We see wine for its potential. Pierre’s view of his land makes us see that our land is a special place... Only here we can bring out our best, only here we can fulfill our potential.

“I cannot try to tell this French guy, ‘You know what, Pierre? We have a problem here. Let’s move your one acre just 100 meters over there — not 100 kilometers, not ten kilometers, not one kilometer. Let’s move it from here to there, 100 meters. He will shoot you. Because now what he has is not the same thing. Here it’s *grand cru*, but there it’s *petit Chablis*, the lowest level. Why? Because it’s the law.”

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Making Great Wine *Wine Enthusiast* magazine, widely considered the leading authority on wines around the world, has bestowed its highly coveted rating of 90 or above on seven of Psagot's labels. Aside from the Edom that Yaakov opened for the meal, the winery's Cabernet Sauvignon Single Vineyard and Cabernet Franc

are highly sought after. Psagot's Shiraz and Prat — a type of port dessert wine — have also earned gold medals in international competitions. The Chardonnay and Merlot have also received high marks, and, with the new 2014 white Voignier, round out the product line.

"The wineries of the Shomron are fast

becoming some of the best wineries of Israel, and Psagot is a prime example," says Gedalya Persky, managing partner of the Cellar 18 Wine Shop in Ramat Beit Shemesh and an authority on Israeli wines. "Psagot's Single Vineyard Cabernet is one of the nicest Israeli wines. All their wines are rich and elegant."



Babysitting the Vines

Over the last year Psagot Winery took another giant leap forward when it hired its first winemaker — Yaacov Oryah, a New York native who moved with his family to Israel at the age of five. Yaacov joined Psagot after the 2014 harvest, arriving with years of experience, having previously served as the winemaker at two other boutique wineries, Assif and Midbar. He cannot emphasize enough how happy he is in his new role.

"Here, I'm in paradise," he says with a chuckle. "I don't have to work hard. Psagot had already reached production of 200,000 bottles and won a lot of prizes without a winemaker. The grapes were good enough to carry the winery."

Readers might already be wondering: What's with the title? Doesn't everyone at the winery make wine? Yaacov explains the subtleties of his job.

"A winemaker has two roles," he says. "First

is being a good babysitter. I don't put flavors into the grapes, the *terroir* does that — the climate, the soil, and so on. I don't take sugar and make it into alcohol. The yeast does that. All I'm really providing is quality control. I'm making sure that the vines are treated properly and they're harvested on time and don't have too much sun, too much water, that yeasts are fermenting at a proper temperature, that they're not getting stuck, that they have enough nutrients to finish the fermentation... It's really making sure that everything is happening right, that things don't fall. That doesn't make a good wine; that prevents a bad wine. You can't really make a good wine.

"The second role of a winemaker is very personal," Oryah continues. "Because once you move beyond the realm of problems or faults, there's a very wide spectrum of what's legitimate in wine. It's really a matter of style. One of the things you want from a winery is consistency in style. And it comes from a personal place. If I decide to keep a wine three days on the skins after fermentation, or three weeks, there's no right or wrong. It's just a matter of what I personally think is right, and that's going to determine the style of the winery. And I think from a marketing point of view, consistency of style will connect a certain part of the general population to the winery. Those people who like that style will buy that wine.

"If you're not consistent — every year you make a different style of wine — one year Group A likes it and one year Group B likes it, and you're constantly fighting to find your customers. If you're consistent, then there's some kind of relationship between the customers and the winery."

Yaacov believes that Psagot's *terroir* positions it to produce some of the highest quality wines in Israel. Why does he think Psagot's location is so ideal? He lists several reasons.

"Start with the soil. It's chalkier. It's also at a high elevation, which compensates for the fact that Israel is really on the southern edge of the world's wine-growing area. We're far away from the sea. Proximity to the sea is not a healthy element in growing quality grapes, for two reasons: The higher humidity affects the health of the vine and encourages growth of harmful microorganisms. And the sea maintains warmth at night; if you're inland, the night cools off. Cool nights are very healthy for the wine's acidity, ripeness, and quality grape development."

Yaacov states that Psagot's region of Bin-yamin is underappreciated in terms of its grape-growing virtues. By that, he means that many wineries are sourcing grapes from the area, but don't publicize it for fear of the political backlash that results from producing wine over the Green Line. "Because it's kept quiet, this area is not appreciated, not understood, and not given its proper place. You could have a very good wine and say this is amazing, but you don't know that it's from the Shomron."

In the meantime, however, Oryah has no complaints.

"For me personally, I'm very happy. We're not hiding it. We're the biggest winery in Shomron but also relying on local *cru*. Our wine focuses on our local *terroir*, unique growing conditions, something I'm very happy to do.

"Everything I'm saying, really, is up for interpretation. The bottom line is, you can taste it in the wine."

Yaakov is not one to rest on his laurels, however. He recently, for the first time, added a veteran winemaker to his staff (see sidebar). And he has also spared no effort in the area of kashrus. The winery is currently under the *hashgachah* of Rav Yechiel Babad, the head of Vaad Kashrus K'hal Tartikov, a leading supervising agency in Brooklyn.

Eli Sales, Psagot's managing partner who oversees exports, recounts an illuminating incident that occurred on Rav Babad's first visit to the winery.

"Yaakov is not afraid to challenge or ask questions with *rabbanim* when it comes to learning," Eli prefaces. "He knows his Tanach and many sources in Gemara and halachah. Before going into winemaking he studied the halachah.

"The first time we brought Rav Babad to the winery, we passed one of our vineyards and stopped to show Rav Babad. Yaakov showed the Rav that although we are limited in space, if a sapling dies and is unusable, we don't replace it with another — we leave the space empty. The reason is that at harvest, Yaakov did not want to take chances that grapes would be taken from these [replacement] vines if four years [of *orlah*] had not elapsed. No one else would notice, but he knew the halachah, and never looks to cut corners."

Yaakov himself says that Rav Babad has told him that Psagot may well be the most kosher winery in Eretz Yisrael, since everyone there — from the workers to the owners — are observant Jews who are *machshiv* Torah and mitzvos *mitoch emunah*, and "not just when somebody's watching — although, of course, Somebody's always watching."

Even though Psagot goes to great lengths to try to do everything right, the political situation in Israel and the world at large being what it is, the winery has encountered its fair share of challenges. Because the winery is situated over the Green Line, Yaakov has found himself the



victim of a boycott — although not by the usual suspects.

"You know who's boycotting us?" he asks incredulously. "Not the BDS movement in America, not even the Europeans. It's coming from Tel Aviv."

Many left-wing secular Israelis, it turns out, don't cotton to the idea of drinking wine produced in "disputed territories." Dozens of restaurants refused to stock Psagot's wines, and one prominent local wine critic omitted Yaakov's winery — along with all the others situated in Judea and Samaria — from his guide to Israeli wines, considered by many to be the last word on the subject.

"If you look in his book, you won't find me in there," Yaakov fumes. "He gives no explanation, doesn't tell you anywhere in the book that he's ignoring these wineries. People who search for me in there might assume that he doesn't consider us a quality winery."

Yaakov is undaunted by all this, however. "I tell everyone who will listen: This boycott isn't hurting us. Thanks to the boycott, we are selling more."

In fact, the US has become Psagot's biggest market. "Where most wineries in Israel export around 15 to 20 percent of their production, we do over 60 percent export," says Eli Sales. And the vast majority of those exports go to America.

That means that Yaakov and Eli have to do a lot of traveling — but as far as Yaakov is concerned, it simply provides him wider opportunity to transmit his message.

"Our goal is not just to make the best

wine that we can, but also to connect people to our story — I mean the Israel story generally, but also the Jewish story, and the Psagot story, and the story of this specific place. I'm sorry, the French people did not bring wine into the world — it's our idea. Everywhere in Israel, you dig, one meter, two meters you know what you going to find? First of all you're going to find someone — but after that, you're going to find an ancient winery!

"What we are trying to do is bring it back," he declares. "Because we believe that, more than we came back to our homeland, the homeland came back to us. The Bible promised us that when the Jews are not here, the land will be a desert. And when we first started making wine here, people said, 'Here? It's a desert! Not a chance.' But the quality of Israeli wines now"—he pauses for a moment, so as not to be carried away on his enthusiasm—"it's difficult to say it's the best in the world, but the quality is very, very high."

For Yaakov Berg, this story is central to his mission.

"I believe people want to connect to a story," he says. "Look on the back of any bottle of Scotch, and you will find a story. 'When King Henry V arrived on his horse...' Yada yada yada. I even met someone once whose job it was to write these stories for the bottles. In our case, our story goes beyond that. Our story goes to the heart of who we are, much more so than for Pierre. For us, wine is so much more than even the classiest drink." ●