

DRINKING & DINING

A taste of Israel: Domaine du Castel

Made in Israel, but inspired by complex French burgundy, Eli Ben Zaken's chardonnay is not to be missed says Victoria Moore



BY VICTORIA MOORE
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Domaine du Castel Chardonnay Blanc du Castel 2012 Israel ([Hedonism](#), £41.30)

This white was pointed out to me by Michael Karam, an expert on Lebanese wine, at The Wine Advocate's Matter of Taste event at the Saatchi Gallery on Saturday. I was actually about to head home. "Wait," said Michael, scrunching his eyes up and directing me back to a table I had ignored. "Try the 2005 chardonnay."

I didn't really want to. I'd tasted enough and talked enough and the weekend was running through my fingers before it had even started but Michael only makes worthwhile recommendations. He was pointing towards the Domaine du Castel table, and so I went over.

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Israeli wines are a neglected area of my wine expertise. I've been to the country only once – to run a marathon, not to go tasting. Of course we still drank – medicinally to steady our nerves so we could sleep the night before and medicinally, to numb the aching



Domaine du Castel Chardonnay Blanc du Castel 2012 Israel



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muscles, the night after. I have no recollection whatsoever of any of the wines except that none were very impressive and that didn't remotely seem to matter.

The taste of the Domaine du Castel chardonnays – I tried the 2005 and the 2012 – on the other hand will stay with me for quite some time.

This is a project that began three decades ago, in 1988, when Eli Ben Zaken planted a vineyard in the relative cool of the Judean Hills, just outside Jerusalem. He likes to say that the first wine was a "stable" wine, not a garage wine as the first ever crush – actually a red blend of merlot and cabernet sauvignon – was made in an empty stable.

Domaine du Castel now has about 15ha of vineyard, only 3.4ha of which are planted with chardonnay. I was impressed as soon as I smelt the wine he makes from it. On the one hand it smelt quite developed, but it was also complex in the way that burgundy is complex, filled with little details, like those translucent sheets of waxy wrapping paper in which you can see threads of wood fibres and pressed flowers, and differing levels of transparency.

"Uh, have you been inspired by wines from anywhere in particular?" I asked Eli Ben Zaken as I tasted it.

He smiled and shrugged – the answer was obvious, it was in the wine, I had asked so he could say it, "Burgundy."

The chardonnay is aged in barriques of various ages, so it has a gentle toasted nuttiness. It is a little warm and loose on the finish, not a wine you would mistake for one from France exactly, but one that would confuse if you didn't know where it was from. It has a richness that is not overblown but which underscores its origins. The 2005 was better than the 2012 but I can't find anyone who sells the 2005 in the UK. If you are interested in chardonnay, or in finding good wines from Israel, do not miss it.

CONTACT

www.castel.co.il



A taste of Bordeaux 2005