



# Wine in Modern Israel (Since 1948)

by Adam Montefiore

## 1950's/ 1960's

During the Second World War, the wine industry began to grow again. By the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, there were fourteen wineries in existence. Eliaz Wine Cellars (1952) and Askalon-Carmel Zion (1950) were founded in the early years of the state. Eliaz was named after Eliezer Seltzer, who was killed in the War of Independence. It was founded in a failed perfume factory in Binyamina. Askalon was founded by the Segal family, who had previously opened a distillery in the Sarona settlement.

James Rothschild, son of Baron Edmond, took over his father's interests in Palestine. In 1957 he arranged to donate the Rishon le Zion and Zichron Ya'acov Wine Cellars to Carmel. Thus the involvement and interest of the Rothschild family in the Israel wine industry extended from 1882 until 1957.

In 1957, the Israel Wine Institute was formed in cooperation with the industry and government. It was initially managed by an agronomist and oenologist from France. Initially, many wines were generically named, but in 1961 Israel was a signatory of the Madrid Pact and names such as Port and Sherry disappeared from the domestic market place.

The main wineries at this time were Carmel Mizrahi, Eliaz, Friedman-Tnuva (forerunner of WEST -Stock), Askalon, and Mikveh-Israel. The main areas of vineyards were the valleys surrounding the southern slopes of Mt. Carmel, and the central Judean Plain & Judean Foothills.

By the 1960's, Carmel, controlled over 90% of the vineyards in Israel. Most of the red wines were based on Carignan, and medium dry white wines were made from Semillon. Carmel Hock, Grenache Rose and Adom Atik, were the most popular table wines. In 1971 Israel's first varietal wines - a Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc - were released in the export market by Carmel.

## 1970's

In 1976 Carmel made a legendary Cabernet Sauvignon Special Reserve, which was Israel's first international style quality wine. It was the first wine aged in small oak barrels and aged in bottle before release. It was to be the forerunner of the quality revolution.

In the 1970's Professor Cornelius Ough, from the University of California at Davis, changed the course of Israeli wine. After visiting the Golan Heights, he reported back that the Golan Heights would be a perfect site for growing high quality wine grapes. The first vines were planted there in 1976.

## 1980's

This set the stage for the quality revolution which began in 1983 with the founding of the Golan Heights Winery, which immediately sought the assistance of Californian winemaker Peter Stern. He was to be the winemaking consultant for the next twenty years.

The Golan Heights Winery re-invented Israeli viticulture and brought New World winemaking techniques to Israel, using the cooler climate vineyards of the Golan.

When Yarden wines were exported to America by the Golan Heights Winery, they were referred to as Israel's first world class wines. In 1987 at the International Wine & Spirit Competition in London, the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 1984, won not only a Gold Medal, but also the Winiarski Trophy as the best red wine in the Competition. It was the first of many international awards.

Tishbi Winery was founded in 1985. Jonathan Tishbi, whose great grandparents planted vineyards for Rothschild in the 1880's, became the first vineyard owner to decide to build his own winery.

## 1990's

In 1990 Barkan took over the Stock - WEST winery (previously known as Friedman Tnuva), which had gone bankrupt. The new owner grew their business to become the second largest winery in the country.

The boutique winery revolution began in the 1990's. Tzora Kibbutz and Dalton followed Tishbi's example of adding a winery to established vineyards. Yair Margalit and Eli Ben Zaken decided to establish their own wineries, resulting in Margalit Winery and Domaine du Castel respectively.

Dr. Yair Margalit was a chemistry professor, who studied winemaking in California, opened his boutique winery in 1989. Eli Ben Zaken was self taught. By a stroke of good fortune his first wine got noticed by Serena Sutcliffe MW, head of the Sotheby's Wine Department. Both Margalit and Castel showed that smaller wineries could also make world class wines.

The 1990's really saw the coming of age of the Israeli wine market. During these prosperous years, Israel went through a cultural revolution in terms of food & wine.

## 2000's

The larger wineries reacted to the boutique winery boom. The traditional, historic wineries of Israel: Carmel Mizrahi, Efrat, Eliaz and Askalon were renamed Carmel Winery, Teperberg 1870, Binyamina Winery and Segal Wines respectively, and they started a revolution of their own, deciding to re-brand, and focus on quality table wines.

The large wineries also invested heavily. Carmel built two new small state of the art wineries, Kayoumi Winery in the Upper Galilee and Yatir Winery in the Northeast Negev. They closed production at Rishon Le Zion and totally refurbished their Zichron Ya'acov facility. Golan Heights Winery opened a new winery called Galil Mountain, situated on the border with Lebanon. Barkan built a new advanced winery at Hulda and planted alongside it the largest vineyard in the country. They also bought Segal Wines. Teperberg built a new winery at Tzora.

Large commercial concerns entered the wine business. Tempo Beer Industries, the country's largest brewery, purchased Barkan-Segal. The country's largest beverage company, The Central Bottling Co., aka Coka Cola Israel, purchased Tabor Winery. The supermarket company Hezi Hinam bought Binyamina Winery. A Recanati, from the famous industrialist & philanthropist family, founded the Recanati Winery. An international consortium of investors from Israel, USA, UK and France purchased Carmel.

The international recognition Israel started receiving for its wines was a major step forward. The Wine Spectator's New York Wine Experience, open by invitation only to the leading 250 wineries in the world, invited Yarden to participate. French critics Bettane & Dessauze selected Castel as one of the wineries featured in their book "The World's Greatest Wines." Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book awarded a maximum four stars to Castel and three to four stars to Yatir. The Wine Spectator chose Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon as one of their Top 100 Wines of The Year.

The Wine Advocate, owned by Robert Parker, the world's most influential wine critic, began regular tastings of Israeli wines. In the first tasting Yatir Winery scored 93 points, then the best score for an Israeli, kosher or Eastern Mediterranean wine. Since then Castel, Flam, Margalit, Recanati, and Yarden have all achieved this score. Castel and Clos de Gat have gone one better with 94 points.

In wine-tasting competitions, Israeli wines have also been to the forefront. Yarden, Barkan & Recanati wines, in particular, have been prolific in collecting gold medals worldwide. In particular, three awards have stood out. Vinitaly gave the Trophy for 'The Best Winery' to the Golan Heights Winery. The Decanter World Wine Awards awarded the prestigious International Trophy to Carmel Winery. The Wine Enthusiast awarded the Best New World Winery Award to The Golan Heights Winery.

In 2016, the Wine Spectator published a cover feature on Israeli wine for the first time and in 2018 the first formal visit of the Institute of Masters of Wine took place.

Today there are 70 wineries harvesting 50 tons or more, 250 boutique wineries and many more garagiste or domestic wineries. The largest wineries in Israel are: Barkan-Segal, Carmel, Golan Heights, Teperberg, Arza-Hayotzer, Tabor, Binyamina, Zion-1848, Jerusalem, Tishbi, Recanati & Dalton. The main grape varieties planted are Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan, Merlot & Shiraz/ Syrah. Israel has 5,500 hectares of wine vineyards. The main wine growing areas are the Upper Galilee, Golan Heights, Mount Carmel, Judean Plain & Judean Hills.

**Israeli wine has certainly arrived!**