

Biblical Wine

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The importance wine assumed in Judeo Christian ritual stems from the prominent position of wine in Ancient Israel. Wine is special to Jews like coffee is to Muslims and tea to Buddhists. Some even say that the Hebrew 'Yayin', maybe the root of the word 'Wine'.

Winemaking began in the triangle between the Black Sea, Caspian Sea and the Sea of Galilee. It was somewhere in Eastern Turkey, Georgia and Armenia, that wine was first made. The vine then travelled south towards Egypt, which was the first great wine culture, where wine's importance was first documented. On the way it passed through Canaan and Ancient Israel, which was therefore one of the earliest of all wine producing countries. The Phoenicians, Greeks & Romans finished the job, spreading the wine message to the west, and bringing the vine to North Africa and Europe.

Wine features very prominently throughout the Bible. Noah, was the first recorded vine grower. He planted his vineyard where the ark came to rest on Mt Ararat. Nomads did not plant vineyards. It was a sign of civilization when people became farmers instead of hunters.

When the spies returned to Moses from scouting out the Promised Land, it was a large bunch of grapes carried on a pole between two people, which they used to illustrate that it was a land flowing with milk and honey. This enduring image is the logo of both Carmel Winery and the Israel Tourist Board.

The wine industry bloomed. Wine was the mainstay of the economy, and the major export. King David had two wine officials. One was to manage his vineyards, and the other his cellars. Maybe these were Israel's first viticulturist and sommelier! People drank copious amounts of wine because it was safer than the water. Wine was also used as a disinfectant for wounds, as a dyeing agent, to aid digestion and for religious ritual.

The reminder of this golden period of Israeli wine may be found in the many wine presses that cover Israel. When you next come across an ancient wine press, read Isaiah's Song to a Vineyard, use a little imagination and it will bring the Biblical harvest scene to life.

The wine press or 'Gat,' is the area where the grapes were pressed. This was normally a limestone basin cut in to the rock. Usually they were square, but sometimes round. There was often a wooden structure surrounding and covering the press to offer shade.

They knew something about winemaking in those days. The wine press was usually close to the vineyard because there was less wastage and a greater opportunity to maintain control of the winemaking process. The whole family would be involved with the harvest. Grapes would be carried in baskets and laid on the floor of the 'Gat', but it would be the men that would usually do the pressing. This was done by treading with bare feet. There was enough pressure to extract the juice, but not enough to crush the grape pips and release unpleasant bitterness. To avoid slipping, the treaders would hold on to ropes attached to the roof.

The juice or must ('tirosh') would then flow down a gully or channel from the main pressing area into a deeper hole, known as the 'Yekev'. (Literally: winery.) Twigs or thorns would be placed strategically to act as a rudimentary filter.

In the yekev, the wine would begin to ferment naturally. The natural yeasts on the skins of the grapes would find all the sugar in the grapes irresistible. The deepness of the hole, and the stone surrounds would keep temperatures stable. Fermentation of the tirosh would take three to five days and the result would be wine.

As soon as the production of CO₂, (a by product of fermentation) finished and before the wine could begin to oxidize, the wine would then be channeled into an even deeper pit, where Caananite Jars were filled. This was a pottery container with two large handles and a pointed bottom. They became better known by their Greek name, amphora. They were closed or sealed with pine resin. This imparted a unique flavor that may still be sampled in the Retsina wines produced in Greece. The amphorae were stamped with seals giving the information of the vintage, vineyard, type of wine and color.

The Talmud describes sixty different types of wines. Some wines were cut by water. Others would invariably have flavors added to improve the taste and act as a preservative. Salt, sea water, herbs and spices like cinnamon were added. Raisins or date honey were used as a sweetener. These flavored wines were forerunners of the punches or vermouths of today. Smoked wine was cooked wine. A forerunner of Mevushal wine, though they did it to concentrate the wine into a syrup rather than for Kashrut reasons. Even in those days they know about drying grapes on mats to concentrate the sweetness. This is similar to Vino Santo produced today in Italy, or the similarly named Vinsanto produced in Greece.

So next time you stumble across an old wine press, remember the success of today's wine industry truly replicates the times of old. If France & Italy are referred to as the Old World of winemaking, Chile & Australia are the New World, then Israel belongs to the Ancient World, where wine culture was born.