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Although Israel has a long history of winemaking, the country does not have its own indigenous grape varieties. The Ottomans, when in control of Palestine, virtually only permitted the planting of vineyards designated to produce food grapes, which brought winemaking to a halt for hundreds of years. It is likely that many local grape varieties disappeared during this time. The renewal of the winemaking in Israel was in the mid 19th century and it developed into a real industry in the late 1880's. Since then and especially in the last 30 years, there has been a tremendous advance in the range of wine grape varieties planted in Israel. This article is designed to follow the story of the different varieties, using evidence from various sources and to focus on the successes & failures on the way.

From Home Winemaking to an Industry

Viticulture only really became an industry in the years of the First Aliyah. Until then, the Jewish communities of Palestine were centered in Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias and Safed. The inhabitants were Orthodox Jews who studied Torah and survived mainly through donations from abroad. Only a very small group of Jews in those days had a supplementary income from what were considered useful trades. So there were for instance shoemakers, tailors and butchers. A similar cottage industry of the time was home winemaking, which was necessary to supply Kiddush (sacramental) wine for the religious Jewish community or Communion and Altar wine for Christian pilgrims seeking 'wine from The Holy Land'. The first recorded evidence of this was in the Old City of Jerusalem, when the Shor family started making wine there in 1848.

In those days agriculture was something to be frowned upon. So wineries primarily made use of the local varieties grown by Arabs in the Bethlehem area. Yosef Weitz of Keren Kayemet, gave us an insight to this in his book 'Hagefen – The Vine' published in 1931. He says the main white varieties of this period were Hallili (aka Hevroni), Sallati, Marawi, Sharwishi, Dabuki, Gendeli, Halbani, Romi, Hadari and Hamdani. Amongst the reds were: Zeitani, Singeli, Karkashani, Razaki, Shemi, Karashi and more. Weitz pointed out that "the Zeitani was similar in size to an olive (Zeit is the word for olive) and the taste was reminiscent of Cabernet and was good to make wine with." The names of many of these grapes reflect their Arab origin. The Hevroni was later planted in Rishon Le Zion & Rehovot in the late 19th century and the Dabuki still endures in some vineyards.

The First Trials

The first Jewish agricultural experience in viticulture was at the Mikveh Israel; Agricultural School (then near Jaffa, but situated next to the Holon of today), founded in 1870. The cuttings which were later used to plant the vineyards of Rishon Le Zion, were taken from there. However according to Weitz, the very first vineyard in 1870 was grown from cuttings from the local Arab communities, but this initial attempt was a failure.

At the same time the Templar settlement of Sharona (in today's Tel Aviv near the Kyria, the headquarters of the Israel Defence Forces) were also planting vineyards. The Templars were Christian pilgrims from Germany who believed in settling in the Holy Land. There is not much evidence about the varieties used, but there are clues from Eliyahu Scheid, who managed the Rothschild interests in Palestine. He wrote: "they planted simple German varieties". The resulting wines also give a clue – one of the wines was called Sylvaner, a 'simple' grape variety from Germany.

In Footsteps of the French

The planting of grape varieties to support a wine industry only began 10 years later in places like Rishon Le Zion, Zichron Ya'acov, Petach Tikvah, Ekron (later Mazkeret Batya) and Rosh Pina. Later Rehovot, Ness Ziona, Shefaya, Bat Shlomo & Ein Zeitim, near Safed followed.

In Rishon Le Zion, south of Tel Aviv, three of the founders had already planted grapes in 1882. According to Moshe Smilanski, David Levontin planted cuttings from Hebron and Aaron Mordechai Freeman planted cuttings from Mikveh Israel. Michel Zalman Pochachevski told the story of these first efforts. He was a member of the First Aliyah. One of the first Jewish agriculturists, he later settled in Rishon and planted his own vineyards. He recorded: "Some of the grape varieties were taken from our Arab neighbours, others brought local varieties from Hebron, which were good only as food grapes. The first vineyards followed the practices learnt from the vineyards of Mikveh Israel, which were planted according French expertise....All the varieties were mixed up in the vineyards, they were not planted in any order - different white, red, black, early ripening and late ripening grapes were all planted together."

At Zichron Ya'acov, the new settlers from Romania planted a vineyard in the first season (1882-83) from local cuttings, which were brought from Safed. Also in this instance, they planted Arab varieties alongside simple French varieties, as described by Eliyahu Scheid in his autobiography.

Sponsorship By The Baron

By the time the new communities received donations from Baron Edmond de Rothschild, the Paris banker and owner of Chateau Lafite, there were already signs of a new direction. The failure of the grain crops, together with the success of the first vineyards, encouraged the settlers to make viticulture the dominant form of agriculture. They planted French varieties received from Mikveh Israel with instructions from Rothschild's French agronomists. At the end of 1884 there was a wave of planting of grapes from the South of France, considered suitable for Israel's climate.

Menashe Meirovitch described these plantings: "The agronomists and the French experts encouraged the planting of grapes in Rishon le Zion according to the French tradition. They chose the varieties from that country, and those varieties were found at Mikveh Israel where they had been planted a few years before.... Those varieties were not food grapes but from the simple wine varieties like: Alicante, Espart, Brachet, Corignan (sic – surely meant to be Carignan), Petit Bouschet (a popular variety in France at the end of the 19th century) etc." Meirovitch was part of the Bilu Movement and also an agronomist and a writer. He was one of the founders of SCV des

Grandes Caves and editor of the JCA Journal, the first agricultural publication in Israel.

It is also possible to learn something from the description of David Yudelovich. He was also a member of Bilu, a teacher & editor of the book 'Rishon Le Zion' dated 1941. He wrote that the first varieties used in the vintage at Rishon Le Zion Wine Cellars were: Alicante (a synonym of Grenache), Hevroni, Zechaka (source unknown to author), Brachet (a red variety from the Nice area of France), Espart (today known as Mourvedre), Rosetta (Altesse – a white variety from the Savoie region in France) and Bordolo. According to Weitz, Bordolo was the Cinsault variety from southern France.

Indian Vines

On his first visit to Palestine in 1887, Baron Edmond de Rothschild decided to go from experiments to reality, from individual trials to the basis of a serious wine growing industry. He chose Gerard Ermens to be in charge of agriculture in Palestine for all the Rothschild sponsored communities. Ermens was an agronomist from the famous gardens of the Palace of Versailles and he also had experience of hotter climates in countries like Egypt and India. (In India he had even succeeded in planting vineyards.)

Rothschild's distinguished team of consultants and managers apart from Scheid and Ermens, included Professor Gayon – Director of the 'Station Agronomique et Oenologique' in Bordeaux and Charles Mortier, the Manager & Maitre de Chai of Chateau Lafite itself, the famous First Growth winery in Pauillac, Bordeaux.

The Baron made the decision to concentrate on Bordeaux varieties – Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc & Malbec. His vision was to make a fine Bordeaux style red wine in Eretz Israel. According to Scheid his motives were genuinely commercial.

Owing to the fear of the phylloxera, which was already devastating French vineyards, Ermens brought over vines of the varieties that he had planted a few years before in Kashmir. These were originally from cuttings from Chateau Lafite. Of course these 'Indian varieties', as they became known, were not resistant to phylloxera and a few years later, they had to be replanted on American rootstock.

The Cult of Noble Varieties

Eliyahu Scheid describes the planting of the classic varieties in Rishon Le Zion: "Mr. Ermens sent some of the vines that arrived from India in 1889 from Zichron Ya'acov and they grafted the new varieties - Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec & white varieties Semillon, Sauvignon and also Pinot for champagne - on to the Espart and Brachet". (The author has not found any other evidence of Pinot or of sparkling wine production at that time.)

Also Menashe Meirovitch referred to the planting: "They brought the classic varieties requested by the Baron – Malbec, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot & Verde (sic). Those were for red wines. Semillon and Sauvignon were for white wines. For the sweet wines they brought the well-known varieties Muscat and Muscat Malaga." Interestingly this the only mention found of Merlot during this period. The Muscat referred to was Muscat Blanc a Petit Grains (aka Muscat Canelli) and the Muscat Malaga is a synonym of Muscat of Alexandria, which replaced the Sultanina vines earlier planted in Rosh Pina for raisins.

These noble varieties, which were introduced in 1888, became the new fashion. The price the Baron paid for them was three times higher than for the regular varieties. Following his second visit to Israel in April 1893, the planting program continued. The Baron wrote to Scheid: "Mr. Mortier recommends to plant mostly Cabernet (referring to Cabernet Franc) and as much as possible. Then Malbec, and a smaller amount of Cabernet Sauvignon. Pass this information on to Mr. Ermens."

The End of the Noble Varieties

The first part of the 20th century was marked by massive over production and complex marketing problems. The onset of two World Wars did not help. The markets began to change and together with this, the grape varieties had to be changed. The Baron's agreement was to purchase all the grapes of the independent settlements like Rehovot and PetachTikvah, yet the high price he continued to pay for the grapes did not improve the situation. At the end of the 19th century there were surpluses, which reduced prices of grapes. Furthermore the low yields of the noble varieties made them considerably less attractive to the growers.

In 1905 a delegation from JCA, which by that time managed Rothschild's affairs in the Palestine colonies, decided to check the wine grower's situation. The conclusions were that there was a global change in demand and that quality wines were being sold at reduced prices. They therefore took the decision to uproot the noble varieties. This took place during 1905 – 1906 and coincided with the founding of Societe Cooperative Vignerones des Grandes Caves, which was to become known as Carmel Winery. That was the end of the noble varieties, which were only to return to popularity in the 1980's.

The Mid 20th Century

The crisis of the First World War and the years following resulted in a further decline of quality varieties. The new planting focused on simple varieties producing good yields instead of quality. Amram Hazanov, an agronomist born in Gedera, who returned from studies in California, had some success growing Trebbiano (Ugni Blanc) and Aramon. In 1925 two new varieties were bought from France, Alicante Bouschet and Grand Noir.

By the beginning of the 1930's, food grapes began to be used in larger quantities. At that time there a developing market for these and the food concern Tnuva began to sell grapes and the surplus was sold to Zichron Ya'acov Wine Cellars, Friedman Winery in Petach Tikvah (later Friedman-Tnuva) and the winery at Sharona owned by the Templars.

Ya'acov Avni, manager of Zichron Ya'acov Wine Cellars, was a witness of the varieties of the 1940's. In his book, 'Know Your Vineyard' published in 1944, he recorded the following information. The white varieties were: "Semillon 15-20%, used to make dry or semi dry wines and sweet wines from the very best grapes; Ugni Blanc 5%; Clairette 5%, made up of Big Clairette and Small Clairette; Muscat Blanc a Petit Grains 1-2%; and Muscat Alexandroni 2-3%, which had two uses as a food grape & for making sweet wines."

The red wine grapes were: "Cabernet Sauvignon 3%; Malbec 3% (these were the base of the best dry red wines, but because of low yields were gradually disappearing); Carignan 20%; Alicante Grenache 35% (thought to have no character and therefore used for everything); Alicante Bouschet 5% - from the Bouschet hybrid family – used for blending simple wines." A surprising addition was the Carlicant (a cross of Alicante Bouschet & Carignan) – a new variety, brought to Israel by the government on Avni's recommendation. In the appendix of the book more varieties were listed Bordolo, Clairette small, Grand Noir, Petite Bouschet, but these were only in very small quantities.

In the 1950's, after the War of Independence & Second World War, Elyakum Oshtashinsky, General Manager of SCV, noted signs of revival in the Annual Report 1954. The emigration of the early 1950's had brought a rise in demand of sweet simple wines and reduced the demand for table wine.

A booklet published in 1967 by Arnon Sofer on the wine industry of the day, reconfirmed the changes in grape varieties. Carignan, first planted in 1882, was now king of the castle.

Revolution

The 1970's brought no good news. French Colombard, from 1974, replaced the Semillon as the dominant white grape. The Clairette & Ugni Blanc almost vanished. Two new white varieties went on stage: Chenin Blanc & Emerald Riesling. The Emerald Riesling was a Californian cross between Riesling & Muscadelle, developed by UC Davis in 1948. It made aliyah in 1979 and became an important variety in a short time. A newcomer amongst the reds was Petite Sirah, known in France as Durif. The Grenache Rose became the most popular wine & was a good use for the large amount of this variety.

Towards the end of the 70's first clues of a change appeared. Most of the wines were very simple blends but Yoel Marcus (author of the first wine book in Israel) mentioned that Carmel Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmel Sauvignon Blanc were available already in 1967. These were the first Israeli varietal wines exported in 1971. The legendary Carmel Cabernet Sauvignon Special Reserves of 1976 and 1979 were the first rays of sunlight of a new move to quality and they gave a clue as to the future direction of Israeli wine.

The 1980's heralded the stirrings of a wine revolution. By this time, Rishon Le Zion, Rehovot, Ness Ziona & Petach Tikvah had no more vines – real estate proved to be more profitable than vineyards. The Galilee & the Golan Heights became growing regions in terms of quality & quantity. The vineyards in the Judean Hills & Judean Foothills also multiplied. Cabernet Sauvignon became the dominant variety and this has continued. Today there are more hectares of Cabernet planted than Carignan and it is undisputed as the number one quality grape variety in Israel. (Though the yield in tonnes of Carignan at harvest is still greater than Cabernet.) The Grenache though, virtually disappeared, being now only 0.25% of the grapes harvested.

The first Merlot was planted on the Golan Heights in the 1880's and first varietal Merlot was sold in 1986. Today Merlot is 17% of the wine grape yield. Chardonnay also first appeared in the late 1980's. Although the Colombard still dominates amongst the whites, it is 7% of the total yield, but the Chardonnay is already 4% (and 13.5 % of the total whites.) Sauvignon Blanc is similar to Chardonnay. Shiraz, appeared in the mid 1990's and quickly found an important future in the industry, being considered most suitable for Israel's climate.

At the end of the century and beginning of the 3rd Millennium brought a lot of new varieties: Pinot Noir, Nebbiolo, Malbec, Sangiovese, Petit Verdot, Mourvedre, Tempanillo, Pinotage, Cabernet Franc & more. Some are used for varietal wines others for blends. Among the whites new varieties, although still in small quantities included: Viognier, Gewurztraminer & Johannisberg Riesling.

Local Hero

The only real Israeli sabra, which was born here, is the Argaman, a cross between Carignan and Souzao. It was developed by Israel in the the Volcani Institute in the early 1990's. Unfortunately, this variety, apart from giving impressive color, did not pass the quality test.

The search for a local variety like the Argentinian Malbec, Californian Zinfandel or Australian Shiraz is a subject of endless discussion. There is a marketing need to give a unique Israeli flavor to wines exported. Obviously such a variety does not have to produce the best quality wine, but it does have to have a 'unique selling point' by combining quality, with being suitable to the Israeli Mediterranean climate and the Israeli terroir. Not less important (maybe even more) Israel has to create a name for being a specialist in this variety. A good story will also help! The development of a local variety is a long & natural process, which combine agricultural realities & marketing necessities.

The possible nominees for the most Israeli variety are as follows:

Carignan, the Mediterranean variety, which was present at the dawn of the modern Israeli wine

industry. For many years Carignan's ability to give high yields was abused and it was only used to make Kiddush wines, grape juice or for cheap blends. Now there is a Carignan revival. There are a few old vine Carignan vineyards producing quality wines with very low yields, which is proving of great interest to the wine connoisseur. (ie. Carmel's Appellation Old Vines Carignan from Zichron Ya'acov vineyards.) The fact that it was here from the very beginning and that no other country in the New World is identified with it (yet), makes it a very serious candidate to be the variety most associated with Israel.

The next candidate is Petite Sirah, which has not been here for so many years (introduced in the 1970's) and compared to Carignan, is a relatively new immigrant. Also this variety enjoys Israel's hot Mediterranean climate. In contrast to Carignan, which is heavily planted in France & Spain, it is present in California and Australia, but is not heavily planted anywhere. Although its origin is France, it has almost vanished from there. However in Israel some old vine, low yield vineyards are now producing some very good wines. The Appellation Petite Sirah Old Vines, produced by Carmel Winery, from the Judean Hills, is a good example.

Muscat of Alexandria is another possibility. A Mediterranean variety that is really associated with this region. It has been here since the time of Baron Rothschild and is planted all over the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean. It remains one of the larger white varieties in Israel – with more than 4% of the harvest. However it is mainly used for sweet, aromatic wines and for grape juice.

There is also Emerald Riesling. During the 1980's and 1980's Emerald Riesling was the largest selling wine in Israel. It is still the second most planted white variety (at just under 5%) and forms 17% of all the whites. It never succeeded in California or anywhere else apart from Israel and is mainly suitable for semi dry wines. Though still a big seller, it has passed its peak as the most popular wine in the country.

And the Winner Is...

We should not try and predict the future. These are still early days in the development of high quality Israeli wines. I predict the classic red varieties, Cabernet, Merlot & Shiraz, will continue to be planted at the expense of the older varieties. The planting areas will continue to move north and to the higher altitude, cooler climate areas.

The Israel wineries will continue experimenting with different varieties in different microclimates. The quality revolution will continue and sometime in the next 160 years we will become wiser as to what has become the variety most associated with Israel.