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Food

November 17, 2011

Old land, new wines

Israeli winemakers concentrate on 'elegant' varieties

BY ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN, JEWISH STANDARD

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As Israeli wines win medal after medal in international competitions, their entry into the mainstream fine wine market is hardly news anymore.

And yet, says Gary Landsman, director of marketing for the importer Royal Wine Corp., Israeli wines are lately reaching new benchmarks.

"We're seeing stylistic changes by winemakers in Israel," said Landsman, who worked in Israeli wineries during the harvest seasons from 2006 to 2008. He's not referring to the big switch from sweet Kiddush wine to sophisticated products that is already well entrenched, but something much more subtle.

"As recently as five years ago, some Israeli winemakers still preferred bombastic, robust, masculine styles, where they're getting rich fruit extracts and using oak barrels to their fullest. Now we are starting to see winemakers temper their use of oak barrels and pare back a little on extraction so the wines are a bit more elegant."

Another significant change has to do with the age of the vines. Although wine making existed in the region thousands of years ago, the modern enterprise started from scratch after the founding of the state and in some ways is just now coming into its own.

"The [wine growing] grapevines in Israel are about 30 years old, and by worldwide standards that is young," Landsman explained. "When wine is made from immature vineyards, that comes through in the taste — some of the younger vineyards have off-putting herbaceous flavors. Only now are some of the first Israeli winemakers, like Carmel, able to offer 'old vine' wines."

The term "old vine," he added, is sometimes dismissed as a marketing gimmick, but the difference is real.

"With older vines, often you don't have to water them because the roots have dug deep enough that they can find the water they need to survive. Though Israel pioneered drip irrigation, for grapes they prefer 'dry farming,' which implies not watering them. Most areas that are putting out better fruit get rain and sometimes snow in winter, so they get enough natural water during the winter months to hold them through the dry season. When you don't irrigate, you encourage the vines to dig down deep, and digging deeper gives you better flavors. When vineyards suck in too much water, the grapes plump up and get watered down."

Carmel's Appellation label, for example, can be found on old vine wines such as its Shomron Carignan 2004, made from Carignan grapes (with a little added Petit Verdot) growing in the winery's nearly 35-year-old vineyards in Zichron Ya'acov. Carmel has a leg up on most other Israeli wineries in terms of age. It was founded in 1882 by Baron Edmond de Rothschild, owner of Chateau Lafite in Bordeaux, France.

Wine critic Daniel Rogov gave Binyamina Winery's Old Vine Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 a score of 94 out of 100, and wrote: "A limited edition, showing dark, almost impenetrable garnet with just a hint of royal



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purple at the rim. Full-bodied, with generous but remarkably round tannins and gentle notes of spicy wood. On the nose red fruits, vanilla and a hint of cinnamon. Opens in the glass to reveal traditional Cabernet blackcurrant and blackberry fruits, those complemented by notes of bittersweet chocolate and freshly cured tobacco. ... Elegance on the grand scale."

Alongside the maturing of the vineyards, he continued, Israel's winemakers have learned which grape varieties work best.

"The wine industry in Israel started with French varietals, such as Merlot and Chardonnay, but now we're discovering that Israel's soil may not be best for those," Landsman said. "There's a lot of experimentation now with varietals suited to the Eastern Mediterranean climate of Israel, such as Grenache and Petite Sirah. This is leading to better and more distinctively Israeli wines."

All these developments represent a rich opportunity to introduce the general wine-buying consumer to Israeli wines if they haven't already been convinced to try them.

To that end, Royal recently started the Israeli Wine Producers Association (IWPA), an initiative to help Israeli wines gain greater acceptance. "You're finding more and more people getting over the impression that Israeli wine equals kosher equals Kiddush-sweet equals 'why bother.' We're working diligently to break that stigma," Landsman said.

The IWPA's ads promote the message that buying Israeli wine is no different than buying from other nontraditional wine countries like Chile and Argentina, and that kosher certification isn't an indication of inferiority, as evidenced by the kosher symbol on iconic products such as Snapple and Coke.

Not that all Israeli wines are kosher — a designation that has less to do with the grapes than with the manner in which they are handled. In order to have kosher certification, the product can be handled from field to bottle only by Sabbath-observant Jews. This is another evolving area, Landsman said. Many of Israel's dozens of boutique wineries are starting to go kosher to increase their appeal to the all-important overseas Jewish consumer.

The IWPA, however, wants to break out of the parochial mindset.

"My goal is to inform the wine drinkers of the United States that Israel is on the map for wine," said Joshua Greenstein, vice president of sales and marketing for the IWPA. The tagline he likes to use is "Ancient land, modern wine."

"Retail shelves are cluttered with so many different labels. What helps is a great story, and Israel is nothing but great stories," said Greenstein, who will soon be meeting with many Israeli winemakers to formulate a game plan of wine-education events in North America.

Greenstein, formerly with large American wineries such as Gallo, understands something about the general market. "In the wine world, people are looking for the next new thing. They want to learn about wine and the stories behind the wineries and the grapes they use."

The organization is hoping to urge retailers to categorize Israeli wines by varietal, along with similar nonkosher wines, rather than putting them in dedicated sections that few non-Jewish shoppers seek out.

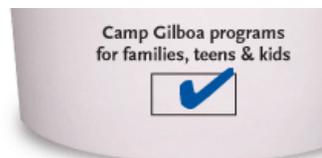
"They need to put all the Chardonnays together," Landsman said. "More Israeli wines are in retail stores today, but mostly in the back, in the kosher section. We want to continue pushing them into the mainstream because they deserve the attention. Why limit the Israeli wines?"

A version of this article appeared in print.

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