

# Decoding Israeli Wine

It's a country that's rich in wine history, yet its wines remain largely misunderstood and underappreciated by the U.S. market. Why Americans should be paying more attention to Israeli wine.

Israel's wine history is perhaps one of the richest on earth, dating back thousands of years. There are numerous biblical references to local vineyards, grapes being transformed into juice that provided an intoxicating effect, and the vine itself was deemed to be a blessing on the children of Israel. Kosher Israeli wine is an integral part of the country's culture—as historic legacy, as standard consumption and also as an offering in many religious observances.

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Unfortunately, it is the common ceremonial use that provides the primary source of identity for Israeli wines to the American consumer. The typical geographic classifications that assist wine drinkers in recognizing a region and the wines it produces—think Bordeaux, Champagne, Chianti etc.—take a back seat to the designation of kosher, which the majority of Israel's wines carry. To many, Israeli wine and kosher wine are one and the same. And the understanding of what kosher actually means is fuzzy at best. (See sidebar: *What Makes a Wine Kosher?*)

The fact is, not all Israeli wines are kosher. The majority are, but there are numerous nonkosher selections, produced primarily by smaller boutique, or garage, wineries. However, most of these nonkosher selections have limited availability or are not currently imported into the United States.

But preconceived notions about Israeli wine and kosher wine, and the automatic association of the two, have created quite an obstacle for the Israeli wine industry. Some believe the correlation discourages shoppers from trying new brands. Many associate Israeli wine with the Concord-based sweet wines, such as Manischewitz and Kedem—a view that may slowly be changing.

"In the U.S., we have a large Jewish community and some still think that Israeli wine is sweet and low quality, but this perception is changing fast," says Micha Vaadia, winemaker at Galil Mountain Winery. "Our export to the U.S. is growing, and much of the growth is in the nonkosher market."

"There is no difference between kosher winemaking and 'regular' winemaking, thus there should be no differences in quality to any other wines produced elsewhere in the world," says Gil Shatsberg, head winemaker at Recanati Winery. "The introduction of technology and knowledge to the industry in Israel dramatically improved the quality of the wine."

Certainly, the industry has evolved over the past 30 years, as winemakers have learned the complexities of their terroir, climate tendencies, resiliency of their vines and the best way to tie all of these elements together. The resulting wines are the best the country has ever offered.



Clockwise: Recanati Winery's Head Winemaker Gil Shatsberg; Binyamina Winery vineyard in the Tavor region of lower Galilee, with Mt. Tavor pictured on the left; Barkan Winery's Shiraz vines in Kiriat Anavim, near Jerusalem.



"The biggest change happened some 20 years ago, when more wineries and well-trained winemakers brought New World knowledge and techniques to the Israeli wine industry," says Lenny Recanati, founder of Recanati Winery. "Before that, there was hardly any attempt to break out of the 'Kiddush/kosher' cycle. There was no research for suitable varieties and matching terroir for them, and no attempt to introduce modern techniques to the industry. The industry changed to focus on quality, and not quantity."

Greater understanding of climate has had a significant impact on the quality of the wines. Israel is divided into five major wine-producing regions: Galilee, Shomron (also known as Samaria), Shimshon (or Samson), Jerusalem Mountains (or Judean Hills) and Negev. Although it's a relatively small country (about 5% of the size of California), its north-to-south configuration offers a variety of altitudes and topographic changes, resulting in numerous microclimates and subzones.

PHOTOS COURTESY RECANATI, BINYAMINA AND BARKAN WINERIES



From left to right: Eytan, Ilana, Eli and Ariel Ben-Zaken from Domaine du Castel. Left: A beautiful bunch of ripe Merlot grapes hangs in Yarden's Ortal Vineyard.



PHOTO COURTESY DOMAINE DU CASTEL PHOTO OF GRAPES RINA NAGILA.

"We're starting to talk about uniqueness," says Eli Ben-Zaken, owner and winemaker at Domaine du Castel. "We have to learn about the vineyards. In Israel, for the time being in the reds especially, there's definitely a difference between the north, which means Galilee and the Golan Heights, and the Judean Hills."

"Israel is a small country; we see very big changes in conditions in very small distances," says Victor Schoenfeld, winemaker at Yarden. "In the Golan Heights, we have a classic Mediterranean climate. On the coastal plain, it is more subtropical; in the south, the climate is arid. We have soils of different types, ranging from one million years old to 270 million years old. Wine was made for a very long time in our area, up to the 8th century. After that, vines started to be planted in our area, the Golan Heights, just in 1976. So we are a very old area and a very young area, all at the same time."

Another key component to improving overall wine quality is discovering which varieties will produce the best grapes in each area. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on classic noble varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay, but research and experimentation for suitable alternatives is ongoing.

"We have excellent grape-growing conditions," Shatsberg says. "Plenty of sunshine to

## What Makes a Wine Kosher?



Contrary to common perception, there are few differences between a kosher and nonkosher wine. The techniques used during production are almost identical; there are just some guidelines to be observed in order to achieve kosher status.

The biggest difference is that a kosher wine can only be handled by Sabbath-observant Jews at all points of the winemaking process, from harvesting the grapes through fermentation and bottling. However, it's not necessary for a head winemaker at a kosher winery

to be Jewish. Many are not, and they rely on their staff to handle the materials and equipment.

All ingredients must be certified kosher. Most wine ingredients are already kosher, but certain items, like unauthorized yeasts and animal-based fining additives such as gelatin or isinglass are prohibited. Kosher tools and storage facilities must be observed, meaning that no designated kosher equipment may be used for the production of nonkosher wine. All production must also be overseen by a mash-

giach, who supervises the kosher status of the winery.

If a kosher wine is handled by a non-Jew, the wine will lose its kosher status unless it is also *mevushal*. The term, literally translated as "cooked" or "boiled," refers to a kosher wine that has been heated to a high temperature to preserve its kosher status, even if handled by a nonobservant Jew.

But even for these "cooked" wines, recent innovations in flash pasteurization have greatly reduced the damage that the heating process traditionally inflicted on the sensory profile of these wines. This means that the raisiny, rubbery or stewed fruit flavors that may have been previously encountered in mevushal selections are far less common today.

mature the grapes on time, we don't have summer rains, spring frosts or freezing winters. We have different terrains, from mountains to sea-level plateaus. It is now a matter of finding the most suitable varieties and clones to match this beautiful terroir. I think that in the near future, you will see a refreshing change from our area...an interesting mix of Southern Rhône and other Mediterranean varieties, such as Petite Sirah and Carignan, with some classic Bordelaise varieties."

Although the common goal is to elevate Israeli wine, stylistic preferences will also begin to emerge as each winery's improved technology, research and experimentation draw it toward either a classical Old World or modern New World style.

"The wines of Israel are very much influenced by the winemakers," says Ben-Zaken. "The Golan Heights are very New World, and there is a lot of oak in the Chardonnay, and this is the style." Whereas the wines of Domaine du Castel in the Judean Hills have been, from the very beginning, "restrained and elegant," he adds. "They're more mouth-coating than mouth-filling," made to be enjoyed with food.

Hopes are strong that a greater understanding of the country and the quality of wines produced will lead to increased interest abroad. "As we learn more and more about our area, we have still not found anything that should limit the quality of the wines we produce," Schoenfeld says. "I am confident that our wines' quality will continue to increase over the next years."

Recanati also looks to the future, while simultaneously recognizing the long road ahead. "Beside the fact that we need to constantly improve and refine our wines, I hope to gain international recognition beyond the kosher market and establish Israeli wines as a trademark the same as Spanish wines, Italian wines or French wines," he says. "We are currently in the beginning of a long process of demarcation of Israeli wines."

To read about what these winemakers eat and drink at home visit [winemag.com/decodeisrael](http://winemag.com/decodeisrael)

## A Mixed Case of Israeli Wine

Check out some of these worthwhile Israeli selections the next time you visit your local wine shop. Or visit [buyingguide.winemag.com](http://buyingguide.winemag.com) for more reviews and suggestions.

**90** Binyamina 2007 Reserve Kosher Shiraz (Upper Galilee); \$25. Imported by Royal Wine Corporation.

**90** Carmel 2007 Mediterranean Kosher Red (Shomron); \$60. Imported by Royal Wine Corporation.

**90** Domaine du Castel 2006 Grand Vin Kosher Red (Judean Hills); \$75. Imported by Royal Wine Corporation.

**89** Recanati 2006 Special Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlot (Galilee); \$48. Imported by Palm Bay International.

**89** Yarden 2008 Heights Wine Kosher Gewürztraminer (Galilee); \$23/375 ml. Imported by Yarden.

**88** Barkan 2006 Reserve Kosher Pinotage (Judean Hills); \$25. Imported by Royal Wine Corporation.

**88** Segal's 2006 Dovev Single Vineyard Kosher Argaman (Galil); \$36. Imported by Royal Wine Corporation.

**88** Shiloh Winery 2006 Kosher Merlot-Shiraz (Judean Hills); \$30. Imported by Royal Wine Corporation.

**88** Yarden 2006 Katzrin Kosher Chardonnay (Galilee); \$26. Imported by Yarden.

**88** Zion Fine Wines 2005 Armon Kosher Red (Galilee); \$35. Imported by Royal Wine Corporation.

**87** Galil Mountain 2007 Avivm Kosher White (Galilee); \$22. Imported by Yarden.

**87** Recanati 2009 Yasmin Kosher Red (Galilee); \$11. Best Buy. Imported by Palm Bay Imports.