

(vin voyage)

# ISRAEL NEW WINE IN NEW BOTTLES

The reasons for a wine tour of Israel are becoming ever more compelling. **Anthea Gerrie** profiles several of the country's most acclaimed wineries and offers top tips for the trip

Gazing out over the verdant vineyards that fringe the eternal city of Jerusalem, with the land of Samson and Delilah to the south and the Sea of Galilee to the north, it is tempting to imagine them as timeless—a 5,000-year-old link between the present and the biblical past, as far back as Noah, who is said to have been the world's very first winemaker.

Yet despite myriad references in the Old Testament—"My beloved had a vineyard in a very fruitful hill" and "Wine makes a happy heart" are only two of the most lyrical—Israel's history as a serious producer of fine wines is, almost shockingly, just 25 years old—less than half the age of the modern independent state itself.

The wines of old Canaan, spanning the Mediterranean from Lebanon to the Sinai and east across the River Jordan, would be considered undrinkable by 21st-century standards. Even the Romans felt they needed to add syrup, spices, herbs, and even chalk to make those early

vintages palatable when they conquered the region before the time of Christ.

The taste for sweet, crude wine must have stuck, from the time the Israelites left for Rome as slaves until nearly 2,000 years later, when Baron de Rothschild arrived in the Carmel Valley bent on resurrecting a wine-growing industry eradicated by centuries of Muslim culture. Until the 1980s, virtually all the wine made in Israel was sweet, red, and sacramental, intended to kick off Sabbath dinners and high holidays rather than to complement a good meal.

"I argued with Carmel for years that they should move away from the sacramental stuff and into quality wines," explains Adam Montefiore, export manager of Yatir, the spectacular boutique winery spawned by Carmel, still the country's largest producer, despite having been beaten to the punch in the premium sector. The company enjoyed a century-long monopoly on Israeli wine production until



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young Turks with modern sensibilities got wise to the fantastic soil and growing conditions at their disposal and anticipated a ready domestic market as well as export potential for fine table wine.

Yatir, and the premium single-vineyard varietals that Carmel is now producing, may yet prove to have come too late to save the lumbering giant, which started as a cooperative in 1882 under the aegis of Rothschild, who was seeking to provide a living for East European Jewish immigrants. Talented winemakers are now making modern wines at Carmel, but many of their predecessors left the company, frustrated at having failed to drive the behemoth forward into modern times.

### **Boutique, chateau, and kibbutz**

The pioneering vintners of the Golan Heights (of whom more later) have grown and prospered, but Israel, much like

California, has become a fragmented mosaic of boutique wineries, characterized by a drive for excellence and a willingness to experiment. This ethos, in a young country where strangers are warmly received, makes Israel one of the most exciting countries for wine lovers to explore, on a tasting journey that will prove a feast for the eyes and spirit, as well as for the palate. How could it not, being dotted with so many world-class archaeological sites relating to Bible stories and some of the most spectacular desert and mountain landscapes in the world?

The Carmel Valley and Galilee Hills, climbing northward parallel to Israel's western shores, are the birthplace of Israeli wine—and a fine area to discover ancient Christian sites as well as Safed, the beautiful hillside birthplace of kabbalah. But the country's first proper wine trail wends its way, a couple of hours south, through the Judean Hills south of Jerusalem where some of the finest wines are made. This



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New vines in the Judean Hills, where wine has been grown for millennia

is ironic, as growers like Eli ben Zaken, the first to plant wine grapes here in 1988, relate: “They laughed when we wanted to make wine here; they said the small, hilly plots with rows of vines you couldn’t get a tractor through would make it impossible. But we proved them wrong.”

Like his neighbor, Eyal Rotem at Clos de Gat, ben Zaken is one of an audacious handful of top winemakers who have achieved greatness without any formal training, fielding some of the finest wines in Israel, according to critics such as Robert Parker and his Israeli counterpart Daniel Rogov.

“I was running an Italian restaurant in Jerusalem and started growing wine as a hobby because I wanted something homegrown decent enough to serve with food,” he laughs. Following the first vintage of Domaine du Castel in 1992, ben Zaken planted more high-density vineyards around his home and became the first winemaker in the premium sector to make Bordeaux-style blends: “I learned from reading books, visiting other vineyards, and talking to winemakers.”

Such an informal, self-taught approach was in no way apparent when I was joined by several other tasters at a recent London tasting of kosher wines, and we all had our socks knocked off by Castel’s Chardonnay. “It’s like the kind of old-fashioned white Burgundy they don’t make in Burgundy anymore,” sighed Oz Clarke—and it was true that the real McCoy, a kosher Meursault at the next tasting table, wasn’t a patch on ben Zaken’s deliriously yeasty, mineraly, buttery white, which was the star of the show.

“It was in Burgundy that I drank my first Chardonnay in 1985,” remembers ben Zaken fondly, “and I felt I was drinking a red wine—it was the reddest white I had ever tasted.”

The two Castel reds (ben Zaken makes only three wines) are also highly rated: Grand Vin Castel, which blends predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon with Merlot and other varieties; and the more approachable Petit Castel, which is a 50/50 blend of the two noble grapes. But ben Zaken and his son Ariel are never going to take over Israel’s premium-wine industry. Acquiring more land for vines is a bureaucratic nightmare, he explains, so Castel production is unlikely to exceed its current level of 100,000 bottles. “Basically, I’m growing wine in my own garden—the land I happened to have around my house,” says the winemaker with delight.

Rotem is another ex-hobbyist winemaker who has achieved great acclaim with the minimum of training. “I was in construction before I decided to make wine in 2001, and I had no idea whether I would make any money,” he shrugs cheerfully.

“I leased 13ha [5 acres] of land and planted my first vineyard before I went to Australia for a few months to learn how to make wine. I went every year after that for a month around vintage time.” The Bordeaux house of Sichel helped create labels and imagery to enhance the mystique of the wine, named for the ancient *gat*, or wine press, found in the vineyards—proving to skeptics that wine was indeed grown on this “unsuitable” terrain as long ago as 3,000 years.

Compared to other wineries of the Judean Hills, Clos de Gat is gorgeous, with its verandaed chateau property

surrounded by flower-edged vineyards and an expansive view not generally enjoyed by competitors who sit within the valley. Appointments to tour and to taste must be made well ahead, however, and given the limited availability of highly rated wines like the acclaimed, new, top-of-the-line Sycra 2004 Syrah and Sycra 2003 Merlot, which will be produced only in selected years, sips may be limited to the flowery Chanson (a blend of 75 percent Chardonnay with Semillon, Viognier, and a touch of Chenin Blanc), Clos de Gat Chardonnay, Ayalon Valley Red (a classic Bordeaux blend), plus Syrah, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon from the entry-level Har'El series.

Rotem originally had an arrangement with a kibbutz, or collective farm, for grapes. And while most kibbutz vineyards are not noted for world-beating wines, Eran Pik, the California-educated winemaker at Kibbutz Tzora, has had his 2006 sweet Gewurztraminer lauded by Robert Parker. Despite the accolades for this outstanding dessert wine, which is practically sold out, Pik questions whether he will ever make it again: "I only have so much Gewurztraminer, and my real ambition is to make a world-class dry Gewurz."

Tzora—established in 1993 as a one-man endeavor by the recently deceased Ronnie James—also produces a delightful Rose from Cabernet Sauvignon, and Pik, who has decided to focus solely on single-vineyard wines, has high hopes for the not-yet-released 2006 Shores Red, a blend of 50 percent Syrah to which 50 percent Cabernet Sauvignon

has been added "for backbone." "It's a question of quality in any given year, not the variety. Our 2005 Shores was all Merlot," Pik explains.

Golan Flam, who also produces only 75,000 bottles a year, grows his grapes not only in the Judean Hills (where his next-door neighbor, Tavlin Spice Farm, offers a brilliant lunch stop on the trail) but also a few hours' drive away in the vineyards of the Upper Galilee. This choice has turned him into a commuter who must regularly zip well over 100 miles (160km) between his grapes to supervise their care. "But these are the two best areas in Israel for cultivating grapes," he insists, "and we believe the varieties and soil types produce bold and expressive wines that reflect the Mediterranean winemaking tradition."

Flam studied this tradition himself in the vineyards of Tuscany, before gaining further experience in Australia's McLaren Vale. He has, in fact, been steeped in wine since his birth in Stellenbosch, where his winemaker father, Israel, was researching modern European winemaking methods for Carmel. That was back in 1969, when the unchallenged giant chose not to gamble on modernizing its products, and the opportunity was seized instead just over a decade later by the Golan Heights Winery. This plant, sitting in terrain still dotted with old Syrian bunkers and gunposts, reflecting the threat it posed to Israel before the Golan was won in the 1967 war, kick-started the Israeli wine revolution on fertile volcanic soil atop the high ridge that divides Israel from Syria.



Eli ben Zaken, the first grower to plant grapevines in the Judean Hills in modern times, samples a recent vintage of his Grand Vin Castel





Carmel Winery, founded by Baron de Rothschild in 1882, is now producing finer wines and welcoming more visitors

### Golan Heights and Chateau Golan

"From the moment it released its first wines in 1984, there has been no doubt that the Golan Heights Winery was largely responsible for placing Israel on the world wine map," says Daniel Rogov. This now-huge winery, which produces more than 6 million bottles annually, is a collective led by senior winemaker Victor Schoenfeld and a team professionally trained in California, France, and elsewhere.

There's little romance at the plant, with its vast stainless-steel tanks, but the Yarden and Gamla wines, particularly, are well worth tasting—perhaps more enjoyably in a good restaurant with fine food, which may be the only environment in which to find the top-of-the-line Katzrin, a Bordeaux-style blend made only in promising vintages. The very large range of wines, produced in four different series, includes Botrytis Semillon, Gewurztraminer, and Muscat dessert wines, while the Yarden dry Gewurztraminer gives its Alsace namesake a run for its money when served with seafood.

While the Golan Heights Winery is so big that visiting can be slightly dispiriting for those on their own, having to fight groups for tour appointments and elbow room at the tasting counter, there is still a warm welcome down the road

at tiny Chateau Golan, whose co-owner and winemaker Uri Hetz gets a kick out of meeting wine aficionados.

"They come because they've heard of the high rating for our Eliad," he says of the proprietary blend of red noble varieties whose proportions are varied every year. "And our Royal Reserve Cabernet Sauvignons, Merlots, and Syrahs have been praised, too. But I love to have people taste our Sauvignon Blanc, which is my absolute favorite. If the Syrians attacked tomorrow, I would run out carrying a bottle of the Sauv Blanc in each hand... No tough decisions there!"

The winery also grows Cabernet Franc, Mourvèdre, Petit Verdot, and Grenache. Hetz, who qualified in viticulture in Oregon, is also experimenting with Viognier blends and has recently planted Roussanne and Grenache Blanc, too, as the winery increases production toward 100,000 bottles a year. He has a bold reason for deciding, like Flam and Clos de Gat, not to opt for kosher certification, which most Israeli wineries still seek: "For me, making wine is like creating a salad in my own kitchen," he explains. "If I can't chop up my own cucumber for the salad, half the fun is gone!"

He is referring to the fact that kosher status—without which even the finest wine will not find its way on to an

Israeli hotel or supermarket wine list, despite the fact many Israelis are not religious—depends on one or more Sabbath-observant Jews being added to the payroll to handle the grapes from the point they leave the vines, bring samples to the winemaker, and supervise the winemaking equipment. It is an extra cost many premium winemakers gamble on being able to avoid, hoping to find a ready export market as fame of their vintages spreads and confident in the knowledge that non-religious domestic connoisseurs will seek out their products in Israel's fine-wine shops and many non-kosher restaurants.

### Carmel farewell

Having spun around the Judean Hills in the south and the Golan Heights in the north, no visitor should leave the country before stopping for a day or two in the traditional winemaking country of the Carmel Valley, which sits squarely on the central coast, more or less equidistant between the two premium wine-growing areas.

The village to head for is beautiful little Zichron Ya'akov, named after Baron Jacob Rothschild, who relaunched winemaking in Israel after centuries in 1882 and founded the cooperative that became the Carmel Winery. It buys in many grapes, owning only a few of the 300 supplier vineyards. But after decades of mediocrity, one of its most daring and successful stabs at reinvention has been its Yatir venture, a state-of-the-art winery in Tel Arad, south of the

Judean Hills, while its single-vineyard wines in many noble varieties, and a top-of-the-line Limited Edition range, are helping Carmel hold its own against the Golan Heights Winery and the boutique brigade.

While they may not have so many rarefied wines, the Tishbi family provide a touring and tasting environment second to none in Israel, where few wineries feel they can spare the time to cater for visitors to any great extent. Jonathan Tishbi, a fourth-generation winemaker, was one of the first independent producers to emerge following the Carmel monopoly; since 1985, the family have been producing good-value table wines, as well as a highly rated Special Reserve series and a brandy.

The Tishbi restaurant in Zichron, which uncannily resembles a Napa Valley wine village, is a popular weekend hangout for residents of nearby Haifa, but the food at the Tishbi winery a few miles out of town is sublime and complements perfectly the winery tour. There are also wine jellies and pottery made by family members, and other local produce is also sold at the deli counter.

With such beautiful wine country to explore, yet so few wineries keen to diversify into the hospitality business, it is to be hoped that Israel's three distinct wine routes will be enriched by more enterprises like Tishbi and Tavlin Spice Farm, which offer visitors a chance to drop in and taste wines with good food, and leave for home with a little something delicious from the shop as well.

## PLACES TO VISIT

### WINERIES

#### Judean Hills

Domaine du Castel, Moshav Ramat Raziel. Tel: +972 2 534 2249

Flam, Avshalom Street, Rishon le Zion. Tel: +972 2 992 9924

Clos de Gat, Kibbutz Har'el. Tel: +972 2 999 3505

Tzora, Kibbutz Tzora. Tel: +972 2 991 5479

#### Golan Heights

Golan Heights Winery, Katzrin. Tel: +972 4 696 8420

Chateau Golan, Moshav Eliad. Tel: +972 4 660 0026

#### Carmel Valley

Carmel, Zichron Ya'akov. Tel: +972 4 639 0105

Tishbi, Zichron Ya'akov. Tel: +972 4 638 9434

### ACCOMMODATION

Jerusalem is the obvious base for the nearby Judean Hills.

The **King David** is Israel's best hotel and an architectural jewel.

Tel: +972 2 620 8888. [www.danhotels.com](http://www.danhotels.com)

The **Mount Zion Hotel** is a less pricey but characterful choice, with Arabic-style decor and stunning views over the Old City.

Tel: +972 2 568 9555. [www.mountzion.co.il](http://www.mountzion.co.il)

**Kfar Blum Kibbutz**, in the foothills of the Golan, is a good base for the northern wineries. Its excellent Pastoral guesthouse offers very comfortable rooms, rafting on the River Jordan, and a standout breakfast buffet. There are a couple of rustic restaurants in the area—one serving locally caught river trout; the other, barbecued meats. Tel: +972 4 683 6600. [www.kfarblum-hotel.co.il](http://www.kfarblum-hotel.co.il)

### RESTAURANTS

**Tavlin Spice Farm**, next door to Flam, is the lunch stop of choice in the Judean Hills; local sea bream with herb sauce is sublime, and there are many fine salad options. The rustic restaurant offers beautiful views of the countryside, and it has a phenomenal deli-type shop. Tel: +972 2 992 4995

**The Regence** in the King David Hotel may be the country's finest restaurant; a mille-feuille of sweetbreads and lamb chops from the Golan was superb. As befits Israel's top hotel, it has some excellent kosher bottles on its list, notably those of Castel, Yatir, and Yarden.

**Dolphin-Yam** in Jerusalem, a fun, non-kosher seafood restaurant in the buzziest part of West Jerusalem, is a great place to taste the stunning dry Gewurztraminer produced by Yarden.

**Decks**, in the Lower Galilee at Tiberias, is a superb, lakeside kosher steakhouse that draws visitors from all over Israel and beyond. There are charcoal-grilled fillet steaks, duck breasts, lamb chops, and ribs, and a perfectly complementary list, including Yatir's sublime Forest, its less pricey but excellent Carbernet/Shiraz/Merlot, fine Cabernets from the Golan Heights Winery's premium Yarden and Gamla ranges, and Carmel's single-vineyard Zarit.

**Tishbi** offers both a pleasant restaurant in the village of Zichron Ya'akov and a superb lunch service at its winery, in a rustic alfresco setting surrounded by vineyards. Expect all kinds of salads, fish, and dairy delights.

*For travel information, see the Israel Government Tourist Office website: [www.thinkisrael.com](http://www.thinkisrael.com)*