



Kosher-for-Passover Wines: More Varieties to Savor

By Hillel Kuttler

On a frigid January afternoon, Howard Kaplan strolled down the middle aisle of Village Wines & Liquors in Baltimore's Pikesville neighborhood. Hundreds of wine bottles stood upright on shelves and reclined on racks, red and white, domestic and foreign.

All those wines are kosher—and kosher for Passover, too.

Kaplan, a dentist, places two wine orders annually, two or three cases (24 to 36 bottles) each, and is planning his next order. While his bulk purchases are made online, Kaplan periodically buys individual bottles in this suburban shop to sample and determine what he'd enjoy with family and friends. With Passover looming, Kaplan faces big decisions.

It used to be that the selection for him and other Passover celebrants across the country consisted of Manischewitz's Concord Grape, the longtime staple of Shabbat and Seder tables.

But contemporary kosher-for-Passover wine offerings exceed 1,000—so many that Rabbi Nochum Rabinowitz couldn't

be bothered to count the names in small type that filled six pages of the annual holiday-products guide published by the Orthodox Union (OU), which certifies kashrut.

"The choices available to people today are just unheard of," said Rabinowitz, the OU's senior rabbinical coordinator, who specializes in certifying wines, including those for Passover. "Today, you have wines on six continents, in all the wine regions of the world that are made kosher. The availability and the kinds of wines are unprecedented."

The four ingredients sometimes added during the winemaking process are what must be certified as kosher for Passover, as they must be for wine that is "just" kosher (or for any food products, for that matter): yeast, usually laboratory-produced, for enhancing the grapes' fermentation; enzymes, for breaking down the grapes; sulfides used as preservatives; and sweeteners.

"Kosher-for-Passover," requires a higher level of rabbinical supervision during



all stages of the production process. Even the processing equipment must be certified.

With the lion's share of annual kosher-wine sales tied to the spring-time holiday—estimates range from 50 percent to 70 percent—vineyards realize that it's more sensible to always be kosher for Passover. So much so that it's almost impossible to find kosher wine impermissible for Passover.

Passover-related sales are disproportionately high, experts say, because wine is so central to the holiday's observance and because of the quantity that must be consumed: four cups per person at a Seder. In the Diaspora, there is a second Seder and the wine consumption is therefore doubled.

Additionally, they explained, many celebrants who don't confine their wine enjoyment to kosher and whose Seder dinners will be non-kosher, still seek out kosher-for-Passover wine for the holiday.

David Perelman, who owns KosherWine.com, which sells directly to consumers but not to retail stores, called Passover a "bottom-line season," akin to general retailers' crucial weeks before Christmas.

"Your whole year will be affected by Passover," he said.

Perelman was among those eagerly anticipating superb wines hitting the shelves this year—labels produced by some of the world's finest non-kosher wineries that are undertaking kosher runs in time for Passover.

The six most prominent vineyards' new kosher offerings are all French: Saint-Emilion Château Yon-Figeac, Saint-Estephe Chateau Le Crock, Margaux Chateau Giscours, Haut Médoc Chateau La Tonnelle, Saint-Julien Chateau Moulin Riche and Saint-Julien Pavillon Léoville Poyferré.

They were contracted by the New Jersey-based Royal Wine, perhaps the world's largest kosher-wine distributor.

"It's very rare, and wonderful, to have a well-known winery make a kosher cuvée—a blend, a run—for you," said Jay Buchsbaum, the company's executive vice president for marketing. "That's the hot news now."

Those vineyards "don't need us," and might find the strict oversight and rules governing kosher-wine production cumbersome, he said, but apparently are swayed by the pas-

Above: The rows of grapes at the vineyards of Saint-Emilion Château Yon-Figeac where kosher-for-Passover wines are featured.

Opposite page: Château Le Crock is a kosher French wine that is 69 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 31 percent Merlot.

All photos courtesy of the Royal Wine Corporation



Above: The castle featured on the property of Saint-Emilion Château Yon-Figeac.

Opposite page: The entryway of Saint-Emilion Château Yon-Figeac.

sion displayed by Royal officials and rabbinic supervisors.

“You can’t make a Léoville [a winery in the Bordeaux region of France] make a wine for you without [the winery] loving you,” he said. “Believe me, with these high-end guys, it’s not the money. It’s much more than that.”

Sometimes, the approach works in reverse. Laurent-Perrier, a French producer of Champagne, approached Royal about 15 years ago and successfully bid to make kosher wine for it. “But that’s rare,” Buchsbaum said.

The kosher and kosher-for-Passover wine markets began to stretch about three decades ago when upwardly mobile, observant Jews sought finer kosher food and liquid nourishment than was available. Out: sweet sacramental wines. In: dry reds and whites. In a way, Buchsbaum said, that preference circled back to what European Jews drank before their waves of immigration to America and kosher wine meant that which was made with cheaper, plentiful Concord grapes.

When palates demanded better, Israeli producers made a splash on the international wine scene, thereby exposing kashrut-observant Jews to greater possibilities.

It’s gotten to the point these days that Perelman’s company is producing some of its own lines, just in time for Passover—Casa Del Cielo and Tierra Salvaje (Chile), Baron Bastide (France), Primo-V (Italy) and Novel (Israel). Most include the Cabernet, Chardonnay and Merlot varietals, all at about \$10 per bottle.

For this Passover season, Perelman’s company has brought to market several high-end kosher wines that parallel some very fine, non-kosher back-year vintages—those bottled but withheld to age rather than be drunk before their peak, and now being sold through prestigious auction houses.

The back-year vintages, also called “library wines,” in the kosher-for-Passover realm, include Yarden Katzrin 2000, Yarden Katzrin 1990 and Castel Grand Vin 2003 (all Israeli); Herzog Limited Edition Chalk Hill Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 (California); and Château Smith Haut Lafitte Grand Cru 2000 (France). Each sells for \$250 a bottle and up, Perelman said.

Back in Baltimore, Jeff Karlin was gearing up for more modest offerings for his clientele at Miller’s Deli, a non-kosher eatery with a liquor-sales section. He is aided by wine wholesalers who stop by to sell their Passover wares and arrange displays three boxes tall along the restaurant windows’ interior.

Karlin expects past years’ pre-Passover sales patterns to continue: for the Seder nights, his primarily Orthodox wine customers will purchase Manischewitz (\$5 a bottle) and Rashi (also \$5), whose low-alcohol content makes it appealing for the children in their often-large families. For



the last two days of the holiday, the better wines, from Israel, like Golan's Mt. Hermon and Royal's Binyamina, will sell well, at \$15-\$20 a bottle.

In February and March, "all our money is tied up in inventory, and I panic," he said. "Then, two or three days before [Passover], it flies out the door. The best is Erev Pesach, when all the procrastinators buy."

Karlin makes sure that his Manischewitz Concord carries the kosher-for-Passover symbol. Because the wine is popular year-round, the manufacturer sweetens it with corn syrup as a cost-saver. With corn products unacceptable during Passover among Ashkenazi Jews, Manischewitz reverts to sugar for holiday production. Once, though, it sent the corn-syrup variety, and Karlin scrambled just before Passover to swap it out and meet demand.

Two miles away, Kaplan hadn't yet decided on possible new options. His choice for fulfilling his own four-cups drinking requirement at each Seder remains the same: a Malvasia variety produced by Bartenura Wines.

The Malvasia contains just five-percent alcohol and fulfills the requirement that Seder wine be red (in this case, blush) and appeals to Kaplan for what will be late nights at the table with his wife, two children and guests. While it is the main wine at the table, there will be other kosher options.

"For those who prefer a better quality, more sophisticated dry wine, I'll have that," he said. "For those who don't like dry wines or who are afraid of becoming intoxicated through four cups of strong wine, I'll have the Malvasia." 

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