

A Grape Reward

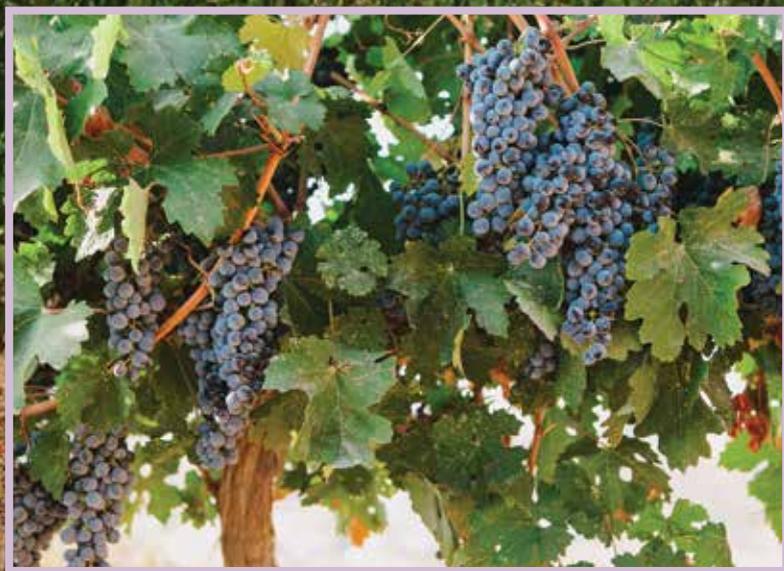


Photo courtesy of Pagan Winery

By Hillel Kuttler

Photo courtesy of Yatri Winery

Judean Hills Vineyards

Boost Israeli Wine Exports

The late-morning spring sun enveloping central Israel means that life is good for those on Karmeï Yosef Winery's pavilion. It's Friday, the start of the weekend for most Israelis, and for some, that means vineyard-hopping—much as Americans might do on weekends in the northern California and central Virginia wine countries.

On this day, 10 women sit at a long picnic table, their wine glasses filled red, baskets boasting fresh bread and serving containers sporting salads and casseroles. Their conversation is animated, their mood relaxed.

Across the pavilion, three men stand at a circular bar, slicing cheese to blanket their crackers and to accompany their wine and their shmooze.

The setting includes a rocky path winding through a series of fields leading to this spot. What's unexpected—to those only somewhat familiar with Israeli wines—is its location in central Israel, just west of Jerusalem, rather than in the more celebrated wine regions of the coastal plains south of Haifa and the mountainous Galilee and Golan Heights.

While those vineyards are better known, central Israel is rapidly expanding its reputation for delicious yields. Not surprisingly, almost all of the wines are produced under the strict rules of kashrut. To some, the variety of brands and types may be a

revelation, wherever the grapes are grown and the wine produced.

According to "The Wine Route of Israel," a comprehensive coffee-table book of Israel's 12,350 acres of wine grapes, an estimated 4,570 (or 37 percent) are in central Israel's Judean Hills, foothills and plain.

That constitutes "one of the premier wine-growing regions in Israel," said Joshua Greenstein, the executive vice president for sales and marketing for the Israel Wine Producers Association. The group represents 19 brands, which constitute 70 percent of Israeli wines, said Greenstein, who is based in New York.

Central Israel might be better known for the Armored Corps Memorial Site and Museum at Latrun, the site of key battles in 1948 and 1967, and for Mini Israel, which draws tourists to a scale model of the country. The area's large towns—small cities, actually—are Modiin and Beit Shemesh, easily accessible to both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. David defeated the Philistines' king, Goliath, in the nearby Elah Valley.

The region's history includes winemaking going back millennia, as indicated by scores of ancient wine presses unearthed on the grounds of several contemporary vineyards.

That background, say Israeli vintners and those who love their wines, helps account for the area's outstanding wine today.

"The [wine] tithing brought to the Temple came from the Judean

Hills. In the olden days, this used to be the wine land," says Yisrael Flam, founder of Flam Winery, as he motions toward his fields.

Two key factors are at play, too. One is that the area, referred to by the shorthand "Judean Hills," possesses the ideal topography for growing quality wine, with its altitude, hot days and cool nights. Another is the care taken by several of the region's fledgling vintners to do things right, for example, studying and apprenticing at European, Australian and other foreign vineyards. The knowledge gained is then applied back home.

Opposite: The fields of Yatir Winery's vineyard in Tel Arad, Israel.

Inset: Grapes on the vine at Psagot Winery.

Below: Yisrael Flam, founder of Flam Winery, stands in front of barrels of his product.

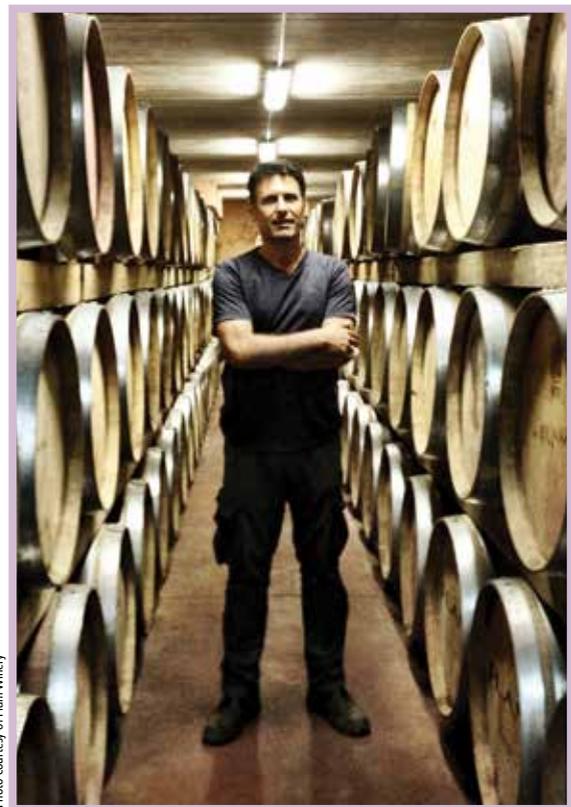


Photo courtesy of Flam Winery

Below: State-of-the-art equipment at Yatir Winery.

Some of the world's most respected wine critics are credited with putting the Judean Hills on the wine map more than a decade ago. Among the first was Serena Sutcliffe, who is Sotheby's international wine specialist.

"The first Israeli wine that really impressed me was Castel, which I found stood out from the rest. That first wine was the Cabernet Sauvignon," Sutcliffe recalled in an e-mail, referring to the Domaine du Castel winery.

Sutcliffe, who is based in England, said that Judean Hills' wines "have gone on improving all the time."

Adam Morey, a buyer for Empire Wine, based in Albany, N.Y., said that wine drinkers talk, and recommendations drive sales. All it might take, Morey said, is a label's mention in *Wine Spectator* magazine or *The New York Times* to prompt a run of orders on his shop, which stocks 6,000 wines and spirits.

"[One that] I've been asked about a number of times," he said,

is Castel's 2008 Grand Vin, which, at \$50 a bottle retail, "is not an inexpensive bottle, by any means."

Castel is just one of several outstanding wineries clustered in the Judean Hills, a group that includes Flam, Tzora, Clos de Gat and Psagot. Even Yatir, located south of the hills at the edge of the Negev, is a burgeoning winery in Israel. Of those, all but Clos de Gat are kosher. They are all small "boutique" operations—hardly the behemoths, like Yarden and Carmel, based in Israel's northern region.

For more than 30 years, Flam was employed by Carmel, including 15 years as its chief winemaker. In 1998, while still with Carmel, he started his own company.

Flam took his wine seriously, first apprenticing at a South African winery and earning a degree in enology, the study of winemaking, at the University of California-Davis. When he started Flam Winery, his sons joined the family business; Gilad is now the winery's director, and Golan

became the chief winemaker after serving a one-year apprenticeship in Carpineto, a Tuscan winery. Their sister is a full-time pediatric psychotherapist but works one day a week to expand the winery's strategic partnerships with Israeli restaurants.

Her name is appropriate for someone in this business: Gefen is Hebrew for vine.

"She was born in the vintage, when the grapes ripen and we pick them [in April]. My wife said, 'What better name is there for the daughter of a winemaker than Gefen?'" Yisrael Flam said, sitting on the vineyard's veranda, just north of Beit Shemesh.

One of his workers can be seen below, pruning a vineyard that was planted the previous summer. After the biblically mandated three years of lying fallow, he says, "Thank God we'll start picking" from that field.

The modern wine-producing period began in the late 19th century, when, Flam explains, the land "renewed itself" following millennia of neglect. In the hills, though, apples, pears, plums and apricots used to dominate but required far more water to grow. Not until the late 1980s was a more concerted effort made to exploit the soil for winemaking. Another decade or so passed before the high-quality wines started getting bottled—and noticed.

A short ride east of Flam, along Route 395, lies the Domaine du Castel winery, headquartered in a series of pastel-painted structures that once were barns on the land's moshav, Ramat Raziel. In



Photo courtesy of Yatir Winery

The Ben Zaken family: Eli, Ilana, Eytan and Ariel of Castel Vineyards.



Photo courtesy of Castel Vineyards

the winery's tasting room, Chief Marketing Officer Stav Avrahami opens "Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book 2008." She points to the British wine maven's issuing of four stars to Castel, the first time he had placed it among the world's elite wineries (it would not be the last). In the 2008 edition, Johnson rated Castel's Grand Vin among his 200 favorite wines in the world.

In 1988, Ben-Zaken, Castel's founder, said, he owned a restaurant in Jerusalem and was dissatisfied with the quality of Israeli wine. So, he decided to plant vines in his front yard.

Ben-Zaken didn't set out to put the Judean Hills on the global wine map, but that's precisely what's happened. The quality of the vines' yield, he says, "was destiny, luck."

Now, Castel is a 50-acre operation that produces 100,000 bottles of wine annually, 30,000 of them white—all Chardonnay. Like Flam, Castel is a family business. Ben-Zaken's daughter, Ilana, is the export manager; his son, Eytan, is chief operating officer; and another son, Ariel, is chief executive officer and spent two years apprenticing in France's Burgundy region.

Yet another superb winery in the region, just to the west, has history and family ties of its own. Clos de Gat sits on the grounds of Kibbutz Harel, through which runs part of the Burma Road, the legendary path Israeli army engineers forged in 1948 to relieve the siege of Jerusalem during Israel's War of Independence. The winery's enormous villa of an office served as Yitzhak

Rabin's headquarters when he commanded the Harel Brigade in crucial 1948 battles.

The "clos" of the company's name is French for an encircled vineyard, in this case formed by cacti, and gat is Hebrew for wine press. Gideon White, who handles marketing and sales, dutifully leads a visitor to an ancient stone press that's reached by stepping past the Cabernet Sauvignon vines and over some brush.

The French and the Israeli words work together, White explains of the vineyard, which produces 90,000 bottles annually on its 50 acres.

"The Chardonnay performs beautifully here on plots of limestone and chalk," White says in the British accent he inherited from his England-born father, William, who consults for Clos de Gat while also representing French wineries.

"It's as close to France as possible because you have the hot days and cool nights. Because it's very hot, you have the high levels of sugar and alcohol," he continues.

Gideon White, too, learned the business abroad, spending a year in Bordeaux and the Pyrenees before returning to Israel and working as a wine specialist in a Tel Aviv restaurant. Clos de Gat opened in 2001 as a three-family business.

The winery is now well-known among Israeli oenophiles. One

of those is Yaron Fueredi. A vice president of business development for Red Sea Hotels Ltd., a Tel Aviv-based investment company, Fueredi was one of the three vineyard-hopping men at Carmei Yosef Winery on a gorgeous March day.

He's made enough rounds on Fridays to receive invitations from several vineyards to exclusive tastings. One invitation was to Sphera, a new vineyard in the Judean Hills producing exclusively whites: Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, White Signature and one it calls First Page. Sphera was launched by Doron Rav-Hon, the former winemaker at Elah Valley Winery.

Of the Judean Hills wineries, Fueredi is partial to Castel.

"I don't think it's cold enough to produce great white wines," Fueredi said of the Judean Hills. But, he said, it still is "excelling at the reds."

"There's no question," he went on, that the region "has vineyards—Tzora, Clos de Gat, Flam, Castel—whose red wines are undoubtedly among the best in the country." 🍷

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