The (Many) Serious Wines of Israel

By Ed McCarthy

It wasn’t that long ago that you had to search U.S. wine shops quite closely to find any quality table wines from Israel. That time is now in the past, as Israel has joined the world community of fine wine regions. Rather ironic, when you consider the land that is now the country of Israel has been producing wine for 5,000 years! The Mideast, along with Armenia and the Georgian region of southern Russia, were the first documented regions in the world that made wine.

Why is Israel only just now emerging in this generation as a source of fine wines? The spread of Islam, beginning in 636 AD, wiped out winegrowing in the Mideast. In fact, the Moslem conquest was so devastating in the eastern Mediterranean lands that all native varieties that existed then have become extinct. Israel now uses only international varieties (mainly of French origin) to produce its wines. On a recent visit, while driving along the road with Victor Schoenfeld, senior winemaker of Golan Heights Winery, he pointed out some unidentified grapevines growing wild along the road, and he half-jokingly said, “Someday I’d like to try to cultivate those vines so that we’ll have indigenous varieties again.”

My mental picture of Israel before my visit had been based on two influences: films and television (news reports and advertisements). Traveling through this historic country really brought the country to life for me. You do get the feeling of trekking into the past at times in Israel, especially in Jerusalem, and yet other cities and the wineries are quite modern. But landscapes tend to be stark and somewhat barren rather than forested.

Israel can trace its wine revival to the 1880s, when Baron Edmond de Rothschild, owner of Château Lafite-Rothschild and part of the famed Rothschild banking family in France, imported French grape varieties and planted the first modern vineyards in Israel. He founded two wineries then, which later merged, and in 1957 they became part of the Carmel cooperative —still the largest winery in Israel. You can say that the year 1957 marks the beginning of modern Israeli winemaking.

It’s quite an exciting time for Israeli wines. Lots of small, boutique wineries, what the French call garagiste, are opening. During my visit to Israel, I spoke to Israeli wine expert Daniel Rogov, who writes an annual Rogov’s Guide to Israeli Wines, about Israel’s wine potential. “One-third of my personal cellar is now made up of Israeli wines,” said Rogov. “There are lots of rising stars, but they need government support and help from the big wineries to succeed.” When I asked Rogov about Israel’s wine future abroad, Rogov replied, “The
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– Daniel Rogov, author, Rogov’s Guide to Israeli Wines

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Israel, a country about the same size as New Jersey, with only a rather small part of its land capable of growing vines for wine, will never be a huge winemaking region. If you have not been to Israel, you might perceive it as a hot, arid country unable to produce fine wine. It is certainly dry; rain falls only in autumn and winter, and there are many stretches of desert land. But the Israelis have mastered the use of well-controlled irrigation, and have discovered good vineyard sites in high-altitude northern regions, such as in Golan Heights and Upper Galilee.

A milestone in modern Israeli winemaking occurred in 1972, when Professor Cornelius Ough from U.C. Davis’ Department of Viticulture and Oenology visited Israel. It was Ough who suggested that the soil and climate of Golan Heights would be ideal for wine grape growing. From these temperate climate regions come fine dry wines, particularly red wines (great white wines need really cool climates). Four major soil types are present in Israel: sandy; red (terra rosa, with iron); chalky limestone, in the stony hillsides; and volcanic soil, in the northern Golan Heights.

Today, Carmel and Golan Heights Winery—whose top line of wines is named Yarden—are the two biggest exporters of Israeli wines. Other new wineries to watch include Dalton, Galil Mountain (majority-owned by Golan Heights Winery), Recanati, Tishbi, and Domaine du Castel. Other Israeli wine producers available in the U.S. include Barkan, Bin-Yamina, Efrat, Segal, and Tabor—the latter a critically acclaimed smaller winery.

Israel’s leading dry table wines are mainly varietal: Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are the popular reds, with Syrah gaining ground; Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc are the important whites. Based on my recent wine tasting tour of Israel, I firmly believe that Cabernet Sauvignon is the country’s most successful wine—by a rather large margin.
The following wine reviews are primarily of red wines, Israel’s strong suit, but I did taste a couple of interesting whites and one very good sparkling wine:

All prices are suggested retail.

Sparkling:

- **YARDEN, GOLAN HEIGHTS, BLANC DE BLANCS 2000** ($20, Yarden Wines Selection): Golan Heights Winery produces two sparkling wines under the Yarden label, a non-vintage Brut and a Vintage Blanc de Blancs; the latter is the better one of the two. In fact, it improves with some aging. The 2000 Blanc de Blancs, available in the U.S. now, is more complex than a couple of the younger vintages I had at the winery. Made from 100 percent Chardonnay from vineyards in the northern Golan Heights, the ’00 Blanc de Blancs has crisp acidity, with very good depth and length on the palate, and flavors of ripe melon and fig. It’s slightly fruitier than Champagne, but closer to France than California in style. A very good value.

Red:

- **DALTON, UPPER GALILEE, CABERNET SAUVIGNON RESERVE 2004** ($30, Allied Importers): Dalton’s ’04 Cab Reserve has concentrated aromas and flavors of spicy red fruits, is dry, with soft tannins, and is medium-to full-bodied. This is a lovely, polished Cabernet, in the California style.

- **GALIL MOUNTAIN, UPPER GALILEE, PINOT NOIR 2005** ($20, Yarden Wines Selection): As you might expect, Pinot Noir has been a much more challenging variety than Cabernet Sauvignon and the other Bordeaux varieties for Israeli wine producers, but Galil Mountain, with its ’05, seems to be going in the right direction. It’s fresh, with aromas and flavors of red fruits, and some vanilla from the oak aging. The ’05 Pinot is Galil Mountain’s best effort so far.

- **GALIL MOUNTAIN, UPPER GALILEE, YIRON 2004** ($24, Yarden Wines Selection): Galil Mountain’s Yiron, a blend of about 2/3 Cabernet Sauvignon, 30 percent Merlot, and three percent Syrah in the ’04, is its top-of-the line red wine. The ’04 Yiron is dry and lean, with some gamy and lead pencil aromas, and lots of oak character. It’s fresher and has more purity of fruit expression than the ’03 Yiron. The ’04 Yiron has good aging potential.

- **RECANATI, GALILEE, CABERNET SAUVIGNON RESERVE 2004** ($22, Palm Bay Imports): Time and again, the best wine in an Israeli winery’s portfolio proved to be its Cabernet Sauvignon, in this case, its Reserve. Grapes come from the northern slopes of Upper Galilee. The 2004 Reserve, 94 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 6 percent Merlot, is a full-bodied, rich, ripe, velvety wine. It has been aged in French barriques for 17 months. It’s enjoyable now, but should age well for another six or seven years.

White:

- **DALTON, UPPER GALILEE, CHARDONNAY RESERVE 2006** ($18, Allied Importers): Dalton has been cutting down on its oak aging for its Chardonnays; the ’06 has been aged in oak for only four months, half the time of the previous vintage, and the wine has not gone through malolactic fermentation in order to maintain its freshness, crisp acidity, and aging potential. The ’06 Chardonnay Reserve is firm, with good depth and concentration. It could benefit from another year of aging.

- **YARDEN, GOLAN HEIGHTS, GEWURZTRAMINER 2006** ($14, Yarden Wines Selection): The surprise white wine for me in Yarden’s lineup. The ’06 has the classic Gewurtz aroma of roses, and it is dry, racy, and delicate, with good acidity. A very refreshing wine. Among others, Angelo Gaja is a fan of Yarden’s Gewurtztraminer, importing a couple of thousand cases each year for distribution in Italy. Great value!

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- **RECANATI, UPPER GALILEE, BARBERA 2004** ($15, Palm Bay Imports): Recanati produced Israel’s first Barbera and it’s quite a good attempt with this native Italian variety. It has lots of fresh, clean, concentrated black fruit flavors with decent acidity. But it’s a bit ripe and soft for a Barbera, with alcohol (14°) on the high side.

- **YARDEN, GOLAN HEIGHTS, CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2003** ($28, Yarden Wines Selection): Yarden’s ’03 Cabernet has fresh, really good concentration of red fruit flavors, considerable tannins, and is well-balanced, with a lengthy finish on the palate. This is a polished, well-made wine that will age well.

- **YARDEN, GOLAN HEIGHTS, CABERNET SAUVIGNON, EL ROM VINEYARD 2003** ($40, Yarden Wines Selection): This single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, along with the even-better ’01 El Rom, are the most impressive Israeli wines that I’ve tasted. The El Rom vineyard is in a particularly cool, high-altitude location; unfortunately, the vineyard is limited in size and there never will be more than a few hundred cases of the wine. The ’03 El Rom has real depth, good acidity, and excellent concentration of small black fruits. It’s a solid, chewy wine that will age nicely for 10+ years.

- **YARDEN, GOLAN HEIGHTS, MERLOT 2000** ($25, Yarden Wines Selection): Merlot, generally a more difficult variety to grow successfully than Cabernet Sauvignon, often yields leaner, greener wines than Cab in Israel. Also, Merlots here seem to require a few years to develop; and for this reason, the best Merlot I tasted in Israel was a 2000 from Yarden, which fortunately is still available retail in the U.S. It has a velvety texture, dusty tannins, and concentrated, plummy fruit flavors. An impressive Merlot that is drinking well now.