

## A WORLD OF ISRAELI WINE

Israeli wine has undergone a quality revolution. The results are impressive - improved quality and international recognition at the highest possible level for its wines. It seems that each year, the Israeli wines are pushing the boundaries with their achievements.

To quote Hugh Johnson, the world's most famous wine writer: "Recently with plantings of classic varieties in cool high altitude regions, a wine revolution took root. Continued investment in modern technology, and international trained winemakers have had dramatic effect." Robert Parker, the world's most influential wine critic, wrote about Israeli wines: "The wines are getting better all the time and some of them are superb."

Israel now has a thriving and dynamic wine industry. The wines are better than ever. Even though this all seems so recent, it is a fact that Israel had been making wine for over 5,000 years. Vineyards again cover the land of Israel, as they did in Biblical times. This long illustrious history of winemaking is now matched for the first time, by the quality of the wines.

### ISRAELI WINE TODAY

The Israeli wine industry today is youthful, dynamic and quality driven. There are more than 300 wineries, (and many more garagistes and domestic wineries), producing wine from every corner of Israel. The variety is enormous. Vineyards cover the land of Israel from the coastal plain to the central mountains and from the Upper Galilee down to the deepest Negev, in the desert.

Israel harvests approximate 60,000 tons of wine grapes and produces over 40 million bottles of wine. There are about seventy commercial wineries, and the ten largest wineries have over 90 per cent of the production. Exports, which are increasing year on year, are over 40 million dollars. Over 55% of the exports go to North America, approximately 35% to Europe and the remainder, a growing percentage, to the Far East.

Lately sommeliers, retailers and wine critics all over the world are beginning to show new interest in Israeli wine. The likes of Robert Parker and Hugh Johnson, the Wine Spectator and Decanter have realized that something positive is happening in this New World wine country, set in one of the oldest wine producing regions on earth.

### ISRAEL'S GEOGRAPHY & CLIMATE

Israel is an Eastern Mediterranean country, part of what some will call the Levant and others, the Near East. It is a sliver of a country bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the west, and surrounded by Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt to the north, west and south.

It is a land of 20,770 square kilometers (7,992 sq miles). It stretches a mere 424 kilometers (263 miles) from north to south. The population is 8.5 million. Ancient names like Galilee, Nazareth, and Jerusalem reek of Biblical history. There are also the modern cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa built on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, which are fruits of modern Israel. The country boasts mountains like Mount Hermon on the Golan Heights, Mount Meron in the Upper Galilee and also the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth.

The country may be divided into three distinct parts. There is the coastal plain, the hilly or mountainous region that runs down the spine of the country and the Jordan Rift Valley, which is part of the Syrian – East African Rift. The fertile part of the country has a standard Mediterranean climate: long, hot, dry summers and short, cool, rainy winters. There is occasional winter snow on the higher elevations, particularly the Golan Heights, Upper Galilee and Judean Hills. There is also a semi-arid area and the Negev Desert, which covers more than half the country.

The Mediterranean Sea is the most important element in Israel's climate. The winds, rain and humidity usually come from the west. Rain is limited to the winter months. Annual precipitation ranges from 100 mm. in the south to 1,100 mm. in the north. Average annual temperatures are 15 °C to 20 °C. In the coldest month of January, the average temperatures range from 5 - 12 °C and in July/August 22-33 °C.

### ISRAELI VITICULTURE

Israel is famous for its agriculture. Israeli farmers are leaders in innovations and new technology, always pushing the frontiers of knowledge and challenging existing pre-conceptions. This technology and drive is also present amongst the country's wine growers.

Israeli vineyards tend to be in an ongoing battle with the elements. There is a chronic lack of water. Israel in terms of sun hours is like North Africa. The coastal area can be hot and humid. The main vineyards of Israel lie at a latitude between 31.5 to just over 33° N. Newer vineyards are at higher altitudes where temperatures are cooler, allowing a longer growing season. The fastest growing regions in terms of new vineyards being planted are the Judean Foothills, Judean Hills, Upper Galilee and Golan Heights. Many of these vineyards rise from 400 meters to up to 1,000 meters above sea level.

However the Israeli sun and combination of hills and mountainous areas with soils of limestone, terra rossa and volcanic tuff, make this small country a winemaking paradise. Due to the total lack of rain during the growing season, drip feed irrigation is essential. This was pioneered by the Israelis in the early 1960's and is now used in agriculture all over the world. The preferred aspect of an Israeli vineyard is a north facing slope with vines planted east to west. The cooling Mediterranean winds from the west, are then able to penetrate the rows of vines. This has a cooling effect, provides ventilation, which reduces humidity and brings down average temperatures.

Most vineyards planted in the last twenty five years conform to a standard. There are 1.5 meters between vines and 3 meters between rows. The usual vineyard density is 2,220 vines per hectare. There is a distinct preference for mechanical harvesting. This means a vineyard may be harvested in a few hours, at the optimum time, and brought to the winery in the cool temperatures of the early morning.

Canopy management is crucial in a hot country like Israel. It is important to reduce the vigor of the vines, but protect the grapes from over exposure. Most vineyards are cordon spur pruned in a VSP – vertical shoot position.

Some of the older vineyards are planted in the goblet, bush vine format. In the Judean Hills some of the vineyards are planted in stone lined terraces. Some of the older vineyards don't need irrigation. The roots of the vines have dug deep into the stony soil over the years, to receive the water required. These vines are hand harvested.

Bud break is normally from the beginning to mid-March and flowering in the two weeks in the middle of April. The main hazard is not frost or hail in the spring, or rain during the harvest, but the dreaded hamsin. These are warm winds that come from the Arabian Desert in the south east, drastically raising temperatures, sometimes up to 40° C. The vines simply close down in order to survive.

Harvesting usually starts in mid to late July. However the bulk of the harvest is from August to October. In a few instances the last Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in the northern Golan Heights may be harvested even in the first week of November. So Israel has a very long harvest period.

### ISRAEL'S GRAPE VARIETIES

The most planted grape varieties are Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan, Merlot, Shiraz/ Syrah, Colombard and Muscat of Alexandria. Many of the quality wines are made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz or are Bordeaux style blends, based on Cabernet Sauvignon with Merlot, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc in supporting roles. The predominant whites are Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, followed by Riesling, Gewurztraminer and Viognier.

Israelis have great hopes for Grenache and Chenin Blanc, two varieties which suffered with a poor image in the past in Israel due to clonal selection and bad winemaking. Both have been replanted with some success. There is a revival of traditional Mediterranean varieties like Carignan and Petite Sirah and they have been joined by other Mediterranean varieties such as Marselan, Mourvèdre and Roussanne. Mediterranean varieties are becoming more fashionable and the southern Rhone style blend is becoming a more popular expression of Israeli wines.

There are few varieties with an Israeli connection. Argaman is an Israeli variety developed in the 1980's by a cross of Carignan with the Portuguese grape Souzao. Emerald Riesling is a variety created in California in 1948, the same year of the establishment of the State of Israel. It was a cross between Riesling and Muscadelle and it never succeeded anywhere apart from Israel, where it became popular for semi dry wines. Muscat of Alexandria is an indigenous variety to the Eastern Mediterranean and it has had a revival, due to the popularity of Moscato. The humble Carignan has been in Israel for 130 years and was the mainstay of the wine industry for many years

There is fascinating research being conducted on local indigenous varieties, to see if any have the potential for quality wine production. The researchers are also checking their DNA with ancient grape pips found in archaeological digs and the classic European varieties. The findings are eagerly awaited. However initial releases of Marawi (aka Hamdani), Jandali and Dabouki amongst white varieties and Baladi Asmar, a red, are creating interest.

## ISRAEL'S WINE REGIONS

Israel, like many long thin countries, has a surprising number of microclimates. It is a country of variety, extremes, but all on a small scale. Israel would comfortably fit into Wales or New Jersey

The official Israeli wine regions were decided in the 1960's and there are talk to update them. The country is divided into five regions: Galilee, Shomron, Samson, Judean Hills and the Negev. The Shomron and Samson areas are the traditional wine regions of Israel. These are coastal regions where the bulk of vineyards were originally planted and they formed the basis of Israeli wine for a hundred years or so. With the quality revolution, new vineyards were planted in the cooler areas of the Golan Heights, Upper Galilee, Judean Foothills and Judean Hills.

### **GALILEE**

The Galilee is situated in the north of Israel.

The **Upper Galilee** is a mountainous area of forests, plunging peaks and stony ridges. The soils are heavy, but well drained. They tend to be a mixture of volcanic, gravel and terra rossa soils. The Kedesh Valley area bordering the northern Lebanese border is up to 450 meters above sea level. The vineyards nearer Mount Meron, range from 650 to 850 meters above sea level. Winter temperatures can be from 0-15 °C whilst in the summer the range is from 12-30 °C. The **Western Galilee** has rocky, terra rossa and limestone soils, and a 500 – 650 meters elevation.

In the **Lower Galilee** at Kfar Tabor, elevations are 100-150 meters above sea level. Soils vary between chalk, volcanic and terra rossa. Precipitation ranges from 400 – 500 mm a year. Ramat Sirin is 400 meters above sea level and the soil is basalt.

The **Golan Heights** is a volcanic plateau rising to 1,200 meters above sea level. The area may be divided into three: The southern Golan overlooking the Sea of Galilee is 350 meters above sea level. The soils are basaltic clay. The middle Golan is 400 – 500 meters altitude. Then there is the Upper Golan which rises from 750 to 1,200 meters. Soils are volcanic tuff and basalt. The annual precipitation in the Upper Galilee and Golan is from 800-1,000 mm.

### **SHOMRON**

Shomron is the northern coastal region south of Haifa, that continues to the central mountains. It is Israel's most traditional wine growing region first planted by Baron Edmond de Rothschild in the 1880's. The main concentration of vineyards is **Mount Carmel** and the **Ramat Menashe** area. Elevations rise from 0 to 150 meters above sea level. Soils vary from calcareous clay, terra rossa, limestone and chalk. The climate is typically Mediterranean. Annual precipitation is 400 – 600 mm.

The central mountain region of the Shomron is known as the **Shomron Hills**. Here the shallow terra rossa soils on a limestone base and the high altitude, between 550 to 900 meters, prove ideal for growing wine grapes.

### **SAMSON**

Samson is not a geographical place, but the wine region is named after the Biblical figure, that frequented the area. The central coastal **Judean Plain** and Judean Lowlands lies south east of Tel

Aviv. The area is from 50 to 100 meters above sea level and it is a hot, humid region. Summer temperatures range from 20 to 32 °C. Annual precipitation is 350-400mm. Alluvial soils mix with sandy, clay loams. There is also a fair bit of terra rossa. Many of the vineyards for large volume wines come from here.

The second part of the region is the **Judean Foothills**, which is a fast growing region in terms of newly planted vineyards and new start-up wineries. These are the rolling hills with chalky soils and clay loams, which may be experienced on the drive to Jerusalem. Elevations are higher, from 50 to 200 meters above sea level and average rainfall is up to 500 mm a year. Winter temperatures are from 5 to 20 °C, whilst those in the summer range from 18 to 30 °C.

### **JUDEAN HILLS**

The Judean Hills is a quality wine region ranging from the mountains from north of Jerusalem down to Yatir Forest. The **Jerusalem Hills**, to the west of Jerusalem, are 400 to 800 meters above sea level. Warm days and cold nighttime temperature characterize the region. The soils are thin, usually terra rossa on a bedrock of limestone.

Around **Gush Etzion** the elevations are from 800 to 1000 meters above sea level. The higher mountains receive snow in the winter. Annual precipitation is 500 mm. Average winter temperatures are 0-18 °C, whilst summer temperatures can rise from 15 to 30 °C.

### **NEGEV**

The Negev is the desert region that makes up half the country. The main vineyard area is in the **Negev Highlands**, in particular Mitzpe Ramon, where soils are sandy loam. Elevations range from 700 to 800 meters. Rainfall is 50 to 100 mm. a year. Temperatures range from very hot during the day (15-40 °C in the summer) to cooler evenings and cold nights. The vineyards are sometimes shrouded in mists during the morning hours. The dryness and lack of humidity keep diseases to a minimum.

### HISTORY

The art of winemaking is thought to have begun somewhere in the triangle between the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Israel must have been one of the earliest countries to make wine – and this was over 2,000 years before the vine reached Europe. The Israelites' interest in winegrowing is a continual theme throughout the Bible and Talmud.

Many wine presses have been discovered throughout Israel. Grapes were then crushed underfoot in a shallow, limestone basin. Fermentation was natural and immediate. The resulting wine was then left to age in the pottery amphorae, often in cool, dark caves. There was a large consumption of wine, far greater than today, because it was safer to drink than the water and there was a very advanced wine trade.

Yet, after the Muslim conquest and the founding of the Ottoman Empire, the once thriving wine industry withered away. Winemaking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a domestic based occupation purely for ritual necessity.

In the 1880's Jews started returning to Israel, in search of viable work. Their efforts were supported and financed by the Frenchman Baron Edmond de Rothschild, who was owner of the famous Bordeaux winery, Château Lafite. He founded a modern Israeli wine industry with an

enormous investment. He planted vineyards, built large wineries with deep underground cellars and sent French experts including winemakers and agronomists. His best efforts to produce fine wine foundered on the lack of a market for quality wine.

In the 1980's, a hundred years later, Californian expertise was imported to bring about a New World wine revolution, introducing modern techniques in both winery and vineyard. In the 1990's small wineries making wines with passion and individuality heralded the start of a boutique winery boom, which has continued until today.

In the 2000's, Israeli wine became more terroir driven, making wine from single vineyards, and identifying and separating characteristics from individual plots within a vineyard. Furthermore, Israel began to receive the quality recognition at the highest possible level for the first time. Wine today is one of Israel's finest ambassadors.

### KOSHER WINE

The term kosher means 'pure'. Kosher wine is made for orthodox Jews who observe the Jewish Dietary Laws. It is necessary to make clear that not all kosher wines are Israeli and not all Israeli wines are kosher! Many are quick to assume the word 'kosher' is a derogatory statement of quality. However the results of tastings and competitions have proved a point. Kosher wines can be world class, receive good scores and win international awards. It is important to understand that the same procedures for harvesting, fermentation, barrel-aging and bottling characterize both kosher and non-kosher wines.

Israeli wineries producing kosher wines strive to make the finest wines possible, which also just happen to be kosher. In terms of quality, the kosher designation is irrelevant.