

Israel

Archaeologists have discovered hundreds of ancient wine presses in Israel, dating from the 4th century BC through to Byzantine times. The flourishing wine industry came to an abrupt halt in the 7th century AD when the new Muslim rulers prohibited production, and the indigenous wine grapevines atrophied or were completely pulled out.

The ancient quality-wine industry in Israel began to be rebuilt in 1983, when the Golan Heights Winery was established. **Cabernet Sauvignon** was the first wine produced, followed by **Chardonnay** and **Merlot**. International recognition prompted additional wineries to follow suit. In 1995 Eli Ben Zaken bottled two barrels from vines he had planted on the Judean Hills. This was the beginning of Domaine du Castel, which now produces red wines of Bordeaux classed-growth quality and Burgundian-style whites.

A wave of boutique wineries emerged, including Recanati, where production includes Mediterranean varieties such as **Marselan**, **Petite Sirah** and **Carignan**. Produced from low-yielding, 40-year-old bush vines, its Carignan (imported to the UK by Berry Bros & Rudd) is an intense wine, exhibiting the red and black spectrum of the fruit.

The Israeli wine industry consists of 300 wineries with 5,000ha of vineyards, producing 50 million bottles. Young winemakers who have trained all over the world produce interesting, diverse wines, assisted by advisors such as Michel Rolland (at Amphorae) and Jean-Claude Berrouet (Tzora). Former Petrus technical director Berrouet boasts: 'In Israel one can obtain classic wines, elegant and complex, with finesse.'

The quality revolution means finding places at higher altitudes for vineyards, such as the limestone-based Judean Hills, where Sphera produces refreshing, complex, mineral wines from Chardonnay, **Riesling** and **Sauvignon Blanc**. The basalt soil of the Golan Heights results in balanced, ripe-fruited wines with clear varietal definition. Galilee's diversity of altitudes and soils (limestone, basalt and clay) produces wines with fine fruit (such as Riesling and **Shiraz** from Carmel's Kayoumi winery), and the 900m-1,000m limestone Judean and Shomron mountains produce powerful Merlot (Tura, Shiloh, G'vaot), elegant Cabernet Sauvignon and fine Loire varieties (Gush Etzion, Teperberg).

Eran Pick MW of Tzora Vineyards and others believe that, in warm climates, blends result in better wines compared with single-varietals as northern European typicity is difficult to obtain, and the mix will therefore



Above: the Kayoumi vineyard in Galilee, in the foothills of Mount Meron

be superior to its individual parts. Tzora's blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah from Shoresh, a vineyard located in the Judean Hills, is a profound, spicy, mineral, elegant wine of admirable quality.

Jacob Oryah, winemaker at Psagot, suggests bottling varietal wines when they have a unique expression, not necessarily one identical to European equivalents. It would not serve the aspiration to quality to cover up the elegant red fruit and spice expression of Psagot's 900m-high, cool-climate, single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. The Silver medal awarded to Psagot's varietal Viognier at the 2015 Decanter World Wine Awards supports Oryah's approach.




Domaine du Castel, C, Blanc du Castel, Judean Hills 2014 93

£37.45-£40 **Kosher Wine, Smithfield Wine**
This is a Chardonnay from vines planted in shallow terra rossa soil on limestone in the 700m-high Judean Hills. Mineral aromas are accompanied by toast and lemon. Precise, sleek and elegant with citrus flavours. Fresh and well balanced, the texture is round and the flavours are long. Charming.

Drink 2017-2023 Alc 13.5%

Golan Heights Winery, Yarden, Bar'on Vineyard, Galilee 2013 94

£110 **Hatov, Kosher Wine**
70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Syrah, 11% Petit Verdot. The vines are planted in basalt soil at 1,040m elevation. Pure and well-defined aromas and flavours of fresh fruit, characterised by cassis and blackberries interlaced with raspberries, tobacco, herbs and sweet wood spices. Complex, concentrated (almost chewy) and balanced, with a round texture, ripe tannins and good acidity. Hedonistic. **Drink 2018-2025 Alc 15%** 

'In Israel one can obtain classic wines, elegant and complex, with finesse'

Jean-Claude Berrouet

Chaim Helfgott is a wine writer, judge, investment adviser and tour guide based in Tel Aviv, writing at www.winegott.com