

Chaim Helfgott profiles the Golan Heights Winery

State of the art again, sixteen centuries on

*W*ine Enthusiast Magazine recently awarded the Golan Heights Winery the 2012 Wine Star Award in the category of New World Winery of the Year. The short-

listed nominees included the d'Arenberg winery of South Australia, Saint Clair Family Estate of New Zealand, Bodega Colomé of Argentina, and Mission Hill Family Estate of British Columbia. This award follows the 2011 Gran Vinalta special award for the World's Best Wine Producer, as well as numerous gold trophies granted by IMSC, Vinexpo and others. For this occasion, I took a trip to the winery to talk to Anat Levi, the CEO, and Victor Schoenfeld, the head winemaker, about the reasons for its success.

'New world' almost does not seem an appropriate title for the Israeli wine industry. Anat Levi observed that "winemaking in Israel flourished for thousands of years but largely disappeared after the fall of Byzantine rule in the region". In fact, archaeologists have discovered hundreds of ancient wine presses in Israel, including in the Golan Heights, dating from the fourth century BC through to the Byzantine time.

In his lecture at the third convention of the Israeli wine

The cold-climate El Rom Vineyard, growing predominantly white varietals. Photo by Rina Nagila.

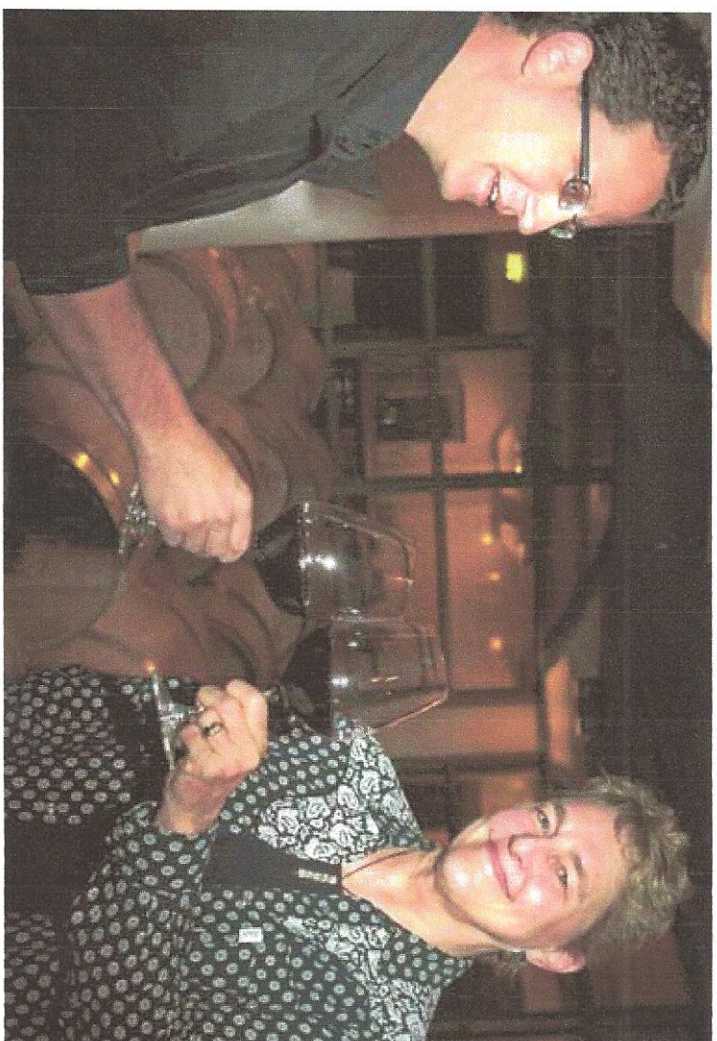
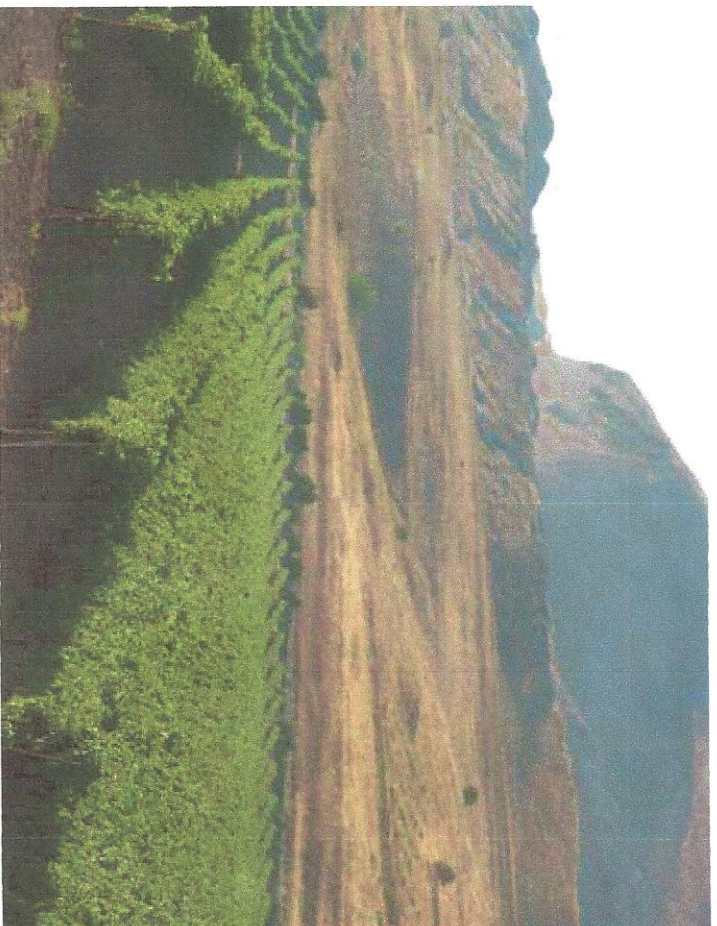


industry, Professor Roderick J. Brodie, from the Business School at University of Auckland, New Zealand, who has majorly contributed to New Zealand wine branding, suggested taking advantage of both the old and the new by branding Israeli wine as "new world wine from an ancient wine-producing region". Indeed, part of Israel's charm has to do with ancient history and modern times existing side by side. For example, only a few hundred metres away from the state-of-the-art stainless-steel fermentation tanks of the modern Golan Heights Winery, archaeologists have discovered a fourth-century AD then state-of-the-art wine press in the Jewish village of old Katzerin, which was destroyed by an eight-century earthquake.

A fifteen-minute drive brings us to the densely populated village of Ganja, destroyed by the Romans in the first century AD, where the production of wine was among its sources of income. At the northern vineyards of the Golan Heights Winery one can see the year-round snow-capped Hermon

Mountain towering at 2800 metres in the background, which is the most probable site of the transfiguration of Jesus. One of my favourite trivia questions to wine lovers is the connection between the wines of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and the Golan Heights. The answer has to do with the pair of keys engraved on most of Châteauneuf-du-Pape bottles of wine, symbols of the keys given by Jesus to Peter while travelling in the Golan Heights.

The end of the Byzantine period, which in Israel was at the seventh century AD, meant the end of the ancient wine industry, an industry revived in 1882 by none other than Baron Edmond de Rothschild, one of three brothers then owning Château Lafite. However, the baron's vision of creating a wine industry producing quality wine in Israel did not materialise until the establishment of the Golan Heights Winery a hundred years later. In 1972 Professor Cornelius Ough from the University of Davis in California visited the Golan Heights, and noticing the successful growth of



Tel Fares vineyard, at 750 metres elevation on an extinct volcano, with southwestern exposure; very rocky, shallow soil; annual precipitation 800 mm; red grapes only. Photo by Tal Glick. Right, Victor Schoenfeld and Zelma Long. Photo by Tal Heflgott.

apple trees, which need portions of cold weather for their development, suggested that both the basalt soil and the relatively cool climate could support cultivating grapes for wine. Eight agriculture communities took on the challenge and established the Golan Heights Winery to produce quality wine, a marked contrast to the sacramental wines that were the industry norm at the time.

Noble grapes, state-of-the-art equipment and US-trained winemakers started the venture. Success was immediate. The first 1984 vintage produced a Cabernet Sauvignon that was awarded by IWSC the Winiaresky Trophy for the Best Cabernet Sauvignon, Worldwide. Subsequent vintages followed suit and were also awarded gold medals.

However, the initial sites where the Chardonnay and later Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir vines were planted were not that suitable for those varieties. The resulting

Chardonnays were both too heavy and too oaky and didn't possess the mineral charm that the current Chardonnays express. Neither the Sauvignon Blancs nor the Pinot Noirs expressed the varietal characteristics of the grapes. As time passed, the research and production teams of the winery realised that the northern, colder vineyards were more suitable for these varieties. It took the winery until just two years ago to produce wines from Sauvignon Blanc that express the herbaceous, gooseberry character of the variety.

The international recognition fuelled further improvements. Additional wineries, noticing this success, started to follow suit, and the process of producing quality wine started snowballing. In Israel this process is referred to as the 'quality revolution' initiated by the Golan Heights Winery. More so than other wineries in Israel, the Golan

Heights Winery is characterised by general overall quality and consistency. It actually changed the wine perception of Israeli consumers; in spite of this, the average consumption per person of wine in Israel is a mere five litres per annum. In response to my inquiry as to the main reasons for the success of the winery, CEO Anat Levi mentioned three: terroir, technology, and personnel.

Terroir

The Golan Heights is within the Mediterranean climate region, with hot summers, mild winters and up to 1200 mm of annual rain in the north, starting in late autumn after the harvest has been completed. The climate is moderated by the elevation of the vineyards from 400 to 1200 metres above sea level. The topography created by the elevation is not rugged and has three plateaux: the southern region (up to 500 metres of

100m of altitude, the temperature cools off by 0.8 degrees Celsius), resulting in a variety of microclimates that add to the complexity of the wines.

The soils are rather heavy, with good water-holding capacity along with good drainage, and a high percentage of stones, either dark basalt or scoria. These rocks, created a few million years ago in a series of volcanic eruptions, are well ventilated, allowing for deep root penetration. Wines produced from vines planted on volcanic soils are known to have both good colour and good concentration.

Technology

Innovation and state-of-the-art equipment has been employed by the winery from its inception. Meteorological stations are placed throughout the vineyards that, along with micro-sensors, collect temperature and humidity data. Electro-conductivity scanning of the soil is also conducted.

As the vineyards in Israel suffer from leaf roll viruses, almost as severely as in South Africa, the Golan Heights Winery has embarked on a plant propagation venture with Entav from France that guarantees the sanitary quality of its clones. The vision is to eventually replace all the vineyards in Israel with virus-free plants.

Another innovation is the use of special software to assist in deciding the planting directions of the vine rows. The common wisdom is to plant white grapes north to south, to have a uniform ripening of the whole vineyard. Victor informed me that in the Golan Heights, for some unexplained reason, the eastern side would get more heat than the western. He demonstrated software developed by the winery that simulates the position of the sun at various planting angles of the vines. The software showed that if the vines were planted at 40 degrees, on September 12, the middle point between veraison and harvest, at 2pm, the hottest time of the day, the sun will be aligned with the rows, providing good light without directly burning the grapes. The vines were therefore planted accordingly.

It seems that decisions at the winery are carried out only after doing the necessary research to better understand the behaviour of the vineyards. A special project has been set



Ein Zivan vineyard, on the eastern slope of an extinct volcano with well-drained soil. Planted with Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot and Sangiovese. In the background is the Hermon mountain. Photo by Rina Nagila.

elevation), the central region (up to 800 metres elevation), and the northern region (elevated by up to 1,200 metres).

Based on information collected by the winery's weather station over 13 years, head winemaker Victor Schoenfeld informed me that the hottest time of the year is the end of July and beginning of August. The typical average temperature range in the southern Golan vineyards, according to Victor, is between 19 and 33 degrees Celsius, and in the northern Golan vineyards from 13 to 27 degrees Celsius.

One moderating factor to the Israeli hot climate in general and in the Golan Heights in particular is the existence of morning dew. The cooling effect of the dew is also magnified by the evening cooling of the basalt rocks that condense the wet air from the valleys coming up to the Golan Heights from the west. Unless there is a scorching hot, dry desert wind that blows in from the Arabian Desert (as occurs a few times a year), the nights during the ripening season are cool and wet with dew. In the northern region there are more than 170 nights with dew a year. "Physiologically, hot and

dry conditions are challenging for plants, but hot and humid conditions are not," Victor noted.

The coldest time of the year is the end of January, beginning of February, where the typical average temperature range in the southern Golan vineyards is 5 to 15 degrees Celsius and in the northern Golan vineyards from 1 to 10 degrees. The coldest temperatures are normally around minus seven degrees Celsius.

At the northern vineyards it usually snows in the winter. In addition, Victor pointed out: "The vineyard planted inside the Avital crater [at 920 metres above sea level] will have colder minimum temperatures as the cold air settles in the crater during the night. This, by no coincidence, is one of the vineyards we have that is equipped with automatic frost protection, as spring frosts are a real threat to this vineyard."

Over a distance of 46 kilometres there is a constant six-degree difference between the lower vineyards at 400m and the highest ones at 1,200m above sea level (accounting for the meteorological rule is that for every increase in

up with Zelma Long, Mondavi's chief oenologist from 1973 to 1979, who has sometimes been described as 'fanatical' in her pursuit of quality in winemaking. The project focuses on eight specific vineyard blocks (out of 400). Large amounts of data is collected, from average pruning weight/vine and average cluster weight (including standard deviation), to percentages of shoots at different lengths, average number of internodes (including standard deviation), average internodal length, and more. The data is the basis of the vineyard management decisions, whose impact on wine quality is then measured.

Personnel

Head winemaker Victor Schoenfeld, a graduate of the University of California Davis's school of viticulture, worked at the Robert Mondavi Winery in California and Château St Jean in France before arriving in Israel 21 years ago. During his tenure at the Golan Heights Winery, the production has increased from 300 acres and 150,000 cases of wine a year to approximately 1,600 acres producing in excess of 450,000 cases of wine per annum, becoming the third-largest winery in Israel.

During that time, the winery has been making wine from almost all imaginable varieties, including Sangiovese, Gamay, Tempranillo, Touriga Nacional, Tinta Cão, Gewürztraminer and Vioignier. It makes dry, sweet (including technologically-induced frozen grapes and port style) and sparkling wines, using the traditional method.

Victor is assisted by a team of winemakers with experience in producing wine in California, France, Australia, New Zealand and Argentina. Beyond his permanent team he has been consulting with Zelma Long, especially in the production of the winery's super-premium wine, Rom.

His philosophy in winemaking is to harvest when the grapes are ripe and to deal with high-alcohol potential by canopy management in the vineyard. In general, it is Victor's view that the issue of wine with high alcohol is a wine writers' rather than a consumers' issue. Consumers don't mind high alcohol in well-balanced wines. He believes that the Israeli wine industry has a lot to offer at the premium

end of the wine spectrum. Not having the economies of scale and cheap labour it cannot compete at the low end of the market.

The wines

The winery produces its wine in three labels: Yarden for its flagship wines, aged for approximately 18 months in barriques; Gamla, more affordable and approachable yet still quality wines; and Golan, fresh entry-level wines.

The Cabernet Sauvignon, the best and most consistent wine produced at the Golan Heights Winery, and the Merlot both show well their varietal attributes. By and large the wines are concentrated and full bodied, with good fruit extraction and deep colour. Victor discussed with me the differences between the character of Cabernet and Merlot in the Golan Heights:

"One distinct difference is the quality of the 'green' side of the varieties' character. The herbaceous side of Cabernet tends to be a 'green pepper' or 'green stem' character, while our Merlot tends to have a more herbal character, such as fresh sage and/or oregano notes (Cabernet will never have these notes). In addition to the red and black fruit notes, our Merlot will often have a bit of citrus note, most often a light orange peel note. In terms of fruit character, the Cabernet balance between the red and black fruits tends to be more in the directions of black fruits, which means a bit of an overall 'riper' character."

Despite being a classical new world winery, Golan Heights nevertheless emphasises the expression of its terroir by producing more single vineyard wines than any other winery in Israel. The single vineyard wines are varietal expressions of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. In



Golan Heights
Winery visitor
centre.

exceptional years the Katzerin-labelled wines are produced from Chardonnay for the white and a Bordeaux blend for the red. The Rom super-premium wine is produced by Victor and Zelma as a blend that contains also Syrah.

Tasting notes

Yarden, Chardonnay Odem, Organic Vineyard 2006.

The wine was fermented in French oak barrels and aged *sur lie* for seven months. A full-bodied Chardonnay with high alcohol and a bit low in acidity relative to the other structural components. The wine exhibits high-intensity aromas and complex flavours, characterised by mango and pineapples, notes of oranges and stone minerality together with considerable oaky flavours of butter and vanilla. A very good wine and it would have been interesting to better experience the terroir by a less oaky version thereof.

Yarden, Cabernet Sauvignon, 2007

As vintage variations at the Golan Heights are usually not that important (the extremely hot 2010 being an exception) I chose to taste a wine with some age to it. In my experience, the Cabernets of the winery start showing off nicely after five to seven years of ageing in the bottle. The grapes come from all over the Golan Heights, adding the complexity of terroir variation to the wine.

The wine expresses fresh, juicy sweet and concentrated fruit of cassis, red currants, layers of jam, blackberry, plum, dry leaves (characteristic of the Golan Heights), earth, minerality, black pepper and nutmeg. The flavours show complexity and good length. The wine has a full body with high, well-integrated tannins, and is a bit too high alcohol in content (15% vol). The texture is soft and round with lots of glycerin. The acidity keeps the wine refreshed. Nobody would mistake it for a cool-climate wine.

Yarden, Cabernet Sauvignon, El Rom Single Vineyard, 2008

This wine, from a vineyard at 1000-1100 metres above sea level, combines power with finesse. It has a full body with high but ripe tannins, high acidity and high alcohol, resulting in a perfect balanced wine with good structure and silky texture. The aromas are characterised by dry leaves,

earth, delicate green pepper, tobacco, cassis, blackberries, pepper spice and a hint of cherries. The palate also exhibits pronounced flavours of sweet and fresh, but not cooked, fruit of cherries and plums, as well as other black fruit. Multilayered flavours. The finish is very long. The only feature that would reveal its being from a warm area is its sweet flavours.

Yarden, Merlot 2008

The grapes come from vineyards at 400-700 metres above sea level, which usually produce heavy wines. The nose and palate show intense aromas and the complex flavours of dry leaves, mushrooms, black plums, blackberries, cassis, notes of red cherries and cloves, with white flowers. The wine is balanced at medium-plus levels of structural components. The texture is seamless and silky. I must admit that the good quality of the Merlot took me by surprise. The winery seems to have made major improvements in the handling of this variety.

Yarden, Merlot Kela Single Vineyard, 2008

This wine comes from a single vineyard planted at 800 metres and, as expected, brings out the aromatic and

the red spectrums of the fruit. The wine shows off stone minerality, white delicate flowers, delicate aromas of green attractive palm branches with dry leaves, red cherries and notes of orange peel, as well as black plums. A full-bodied wine with complex flavours of ripe red fruit accompanied by chocolate and wood-related spices. This wine has finesse and a long finish.

Yarden, Syrah, Jonatan Single Vineyard, 2007

The vineyard is planted at 700 metres. The wine exhibits high-intensity aromas of blackberries, tobacco, smoke, and leather, and notes of raspberries, cherries and wood spices. The wine's body is full with medium acidity and high alcohol. The palate reveals rich sweet fruit with high but ripe tannins and a medium-plus finish.

Yarden 2T, 2009

The '2T' relates to Touriga Nacional and Tinta Cão, the Portuguese varieties that comprise the blend. The wine exhibits high intensity of aromas characterised by black and mostly red juicy fruit of sour cherries, red ripe cherries, plums, notes of strawberries and mushrooms. The nose shows slight herbaceous notes, with lots of black pepper, violets and wood-related spices. The wine has a full body, high alcohol and ripe tannins, with a bit too-low acidity.

Yarden, Rom, 2006

From the same varieties as the Yarden 2T wine a sweet fortified wine in the style of a vintage port is produced. This super-premium wine, produced with the assistance of Zelma, is one of the best wines ever produced in Israel. The blend is divided equally between Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. The wine has pronounced intensity of aromas and flavours characterised by red currants, blackberries, plums and tar. In the glass it continues to develop towards red fruit, especially raspberries, followed by bitter chocolate. The wine is just bursting with fresh, but not cooked, flavours. It has a full body with 15% alcohol that feels much less, with high but ripe and fine-grained tannins. The high acidity contributes to a balanced, deep, complex wine with finesse. The wine should be laid down for additional five years and then be drunk over the following 10-12 years. If I had to grade the wine it would be in the vicinity of 95/100.

