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ISRAEL

These ancient vine-growing Mediterranean lands have lingered in the fine wine shadows, but in recent years Israel's wines, white and red, have begun to make waves at home and abroad

STORY & SELECTION DEMETRI WALTERS MW

Personality. I can think of few parts of the world of wine that possess as much of it, alongside individuality, as Israel. Its story needs to be heard. Wine has been central to this land since before it was even Israel, and Judaism celebrates with wine for much of its ritual. Modern Israeli wine was born in the 1880s when Baron Edmond de Rothschild introduced mainly Bordeaux varieties to the region. Ambitious planting programmes took place a century later, and many Israelis studied winemaking abroad – particularly in California. The 1990s saw a flourishing of innovative smaller wineries, though the most marked developments have occurred in the past 10 years.

As you might expect, Israel is the centre of kosher wine production. This adheres to Jewish kashrut dietary laws and is handled by observant Jews. However, it's not all about the rising fortunes of kosher. According to Adam Montefiore, journalist and author of *The Wine Route of Israel*, while some 95% of Israel's wine is kosher, about 45% of the 300 or so wineries, mostly boutique operations, are non-kosher.



Tzora Vineyards' Judean Hills estate

'This is an Old World country with a New World take on making wine'

SMALL BUT MIGHTY

For a diminutive country, Israel possesses an impressive diversity of microclimates and topography. A Mediterranean climate persists across most of the country, with long, hot summers and cool, wet winters, and even snow on higher ground. Annual rainfall varies from 1,000mm and up in the often cooler and more humid Galilee and Golan Heights, to about 50mm in the Negev.

Generally speaking, soils are volcanic in the elevated northern regions of Galilee and Golan (rising to 1,200m), with sandy red soils (including terra rossa) and alluvial soil on the Coastal Plain, and limestone and chalk in the Central Mountains, home to the celebrated Shomron, Mount Carmel and Judean Hills. The Judean Foothills comprise more than a quarter of Israel's 5,500ha of wine vineyards and are generally chalk and clay. The Negev Highlands abound with vineyards up to about 1,000m and soils range from loess to sandy loam. The focus in general is on sub-regions, but Israel's winemakers are as yet largely unencumbered by appellation restrictions.

Though the trend is moving away from varietal wines towards blends, long-time residents include: Chardonnay, Colombard, Sauvignon Blanc and Muscat, Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan and Shiraz/Syrah; while Viognier, Grenache, Petite Sirah and Mourvèdre are growing in popularity. So, too, are characterful native varieties of Palestine – whites Dabouki, Hamdani/Marawi and Jandali, and reds Baladi and Bittuni – although for now they exist in tiny populations. Israel's own local red crossing Argaman performs excellently in affordable, deeply coloured, fruity wines.

This is a land with a very long vinous memory, though we're witnessing many new initiatives in its current phase of history. You might say that this is an Old World country with a New World take on making wine. Ultimately it's about wine quality. It's never been better, and its delivery is engagingly bold and characterful.

With special thanks going to Moshé Cohen *(inthevineyardwith.com)* for ably assisting with samples not currently available in the UK. *DW*

Flam, Camellia, Judean Hills 2021

£51.99 **Susser Wine Shop, The Grapevine**

Fragrant lemon zest and hints of orange blossom. The initial aromatic power is kept in check by a chalky palate, which is altogether more restrained and redolent of stone fruit, white melon and honeysuckle. While joyful and fruity, this is a decidedly fresh wine with much non-fruit textural intensity and a lengthy, complex finish. A good Chardonnay, regardless of its origin. **Drink** 2023-2029 **Alcohol** 14%



92

Sphera, White Concepts Riesling, Judean Hills 2020

POA **32°-34° Wines**

Floral and fragrant, with lemon and lime, but also something tropical – pineapple, maybe. Fresh, textured, decidedly linear in its fruit intensity and mouthfeel. Shows the textural grip and marked precision of a varietally correct Riesling. Perhaps not like any other Riesling I've had, but it is definitely Riesling, and shows the poised acidity of the grape. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 12.5%



91

Tzora, Shoresh Blanc, Judean Hills 2020

POA **32°-34° Wines**

A textured and fresh Sauvignon Blanc with 25% Chardonnay. This is not about fruit abundance, but more about the way it feels on the palate, which is precise, refreshing and cleansing. Yellow apple, Mirabelle plum and honeydew melon vie for attention. A good food wine, with sufficient weight, a little creamy oakiness, some oxidative non-fruit interest and lovely oyster-shell minerality. **Drink** 2023-2029 **Alc** 13.5%



91

Seahorse, James Chenin Blanc, Judean Hills 2018

seahorsewines.com

Quite muted on the nose at first, but this gives way to textural intensity. Tart apple, lemon juice and apricot on the palate. I swear this wine has a hint of salinity. Its seriousness, fruit purity and freshness really guide and delineate it. A wine of contemplation and for serious food; not, to my mind, just for quaffing. This really needs oxygen, so best decanted. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 14%



90

Cremisan, Hamdani-Jandali, Bethlehem, West Bank 2020

£19.95 (2017) **32°-34° Wines**

From an equal blend of Hamdani (Marawi) and Jandali, the predominant white grapes of the Palestinian territories, and it has harnessed the personality of these native grapes very well indeed. A markedly floral wine, with quince notes and hints of peach. Fairly ripe, with notable texture and no wood. The acidity's modest, but freshens sufficiently to frame the whole characterful event. **Drink** 2023-2025 **Alc** 12%



89

Castel, Rosé du Castel, Judean Hills 2021

£46.50 **Hedonism, Susser Wine Shop, The Grapevine, Whole Foods Market**

Not quite the season for this wine yet, but hang in there. Merlot, Malbec and Cabernet Franc, and a pretty pale pink. The nose is redolent of strawberry and raspberry and the palate accords with that. Good acidic freshness. A very clean, rewarding wine for drinks with friends, sunny days and al fresco dining. It'll go with everything you want it to. Delicious! **Drink** 2023-2024 **Alc** 12.5%



89

Lewinsohn, Garage de Papa Vendange Entière, Judean Hills 2020

lewinsohnwinery.com

This Petite Sirah has such an attractive, plush bouquet of blackberry, though also a red-berried note akin to raspberry. Hints of toast, clove and spice add another dimension of complexity. It's juicy but tart, with well-handled oak. A nice juxtaposition of flavour and texture. Despite the fine-grained tannic tension you can drink this now, but I'd wait; this, to me, is one for long cellaring. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alc** 13%



95

Nachmani, Geneste Grenache, Galilee 2021

@nachmaniwinery

David Nachmani has created a delightfully perfumed wine with a beautiful pale ruby hue. It's these lighter-coloured, more delicately fruited, restrained red wines that so well express the eastern Mediterranean wine story. It possesses a crunchy red-berried fruit character and an almost thyme-like follow-up, with spice, too. A well-made wine that's eminently quaffable. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 14.9%



95

Tzora, Misty Hills, Judean Hills 2020

£95 (2016) **32°-34° Wines**

Eran Pick MW's top cuvée (59% Cabernet Sauvignon, 41% Syrah) is fragrant and approachable on the nose, though brooding on the palate. This is reflected in the taut, fine-grained tannic structure and the compact and crunchy nature of the fruit. As the wine opens up, a bouquet of mint begins to emerge, though at no point is the oak intrusive. This is quite something and definitely one for the cellar. **Drink** 2023-2034 **Alc** 14.5%



95

Nachmani, Mika Reserve Shiraz, Galilee 2019

@nachmaniwinery

An attractive juxtaposition of bold blackberry plushness and a refreshingly stemmy greeness, thanks to elevations of 700m or more for its vines, close to Mount Hermon. Blackcurrant leaf weaves its way through and the precise tannic tension adds a sinewy charm of its own. I have a feeling it will age delightfully well for a few years yet. **Drink** 2023-2032 **Alc** 14.6%



94

Razi'el, Judean Hills 2019

£49.99 **Areles, Susser Wine Shop, The Grapevine**

Eli Ben Zaken, the patriarch of the Israeli wine scene, has fashioned a delicious Rhône blend of Syrah and Carignan. The first inhalation is completely about bay leaf. On the palate, this cool herbal quality follows through, though there's a mounting earthiness and black pepper character. It's quite stemmy and sappy, but in a good way. A thoughtful and reflective wine for the cellar. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 14.5%



94

Abaya, Um-Tut, Shefaya Valley, Coastal Plain 2018

abayawinery.com

Fragrant raspberry gives way to something altogether more medicinal on the palate, though that juicy, softly spoken Carignan tart cherry still abounds. A lovely tannic grip bolsters the wine's freshness. It's Carignan's ability to bring non-fruit interest (here, olive tapenade and peaty notes), as well as bright but delicate fruit intensity, that makes it so compelling. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 13.5%



93

Lewinsohn, Garage de Papa Rouge, Ella Valley, Judean Foothills 2020

lewinsohnwinery.com

The red wine that Ido Lewinsohn MW makes every year in little open-top vats. Tarter and more taut than the Vendange Entière Petite Sirah *(p129)*, this is a classic Syrah (with a splash of Petite Sirah) that's leaner and less plush. The expected blackberry is here, though somewhat meaty and herbal, with a seam of capsicum and black pepper, and watermelon rind on the finish. Sinewy and remarkably fresh. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 13.5%



93

Maia, Mare Red, Samson 2019

£35 (2020) **32°-34° Wines**

A blend that fits the climate and inhabits the sense of place. Carignan, Syrah and Mourvèdre are at home here and have produced a wine of delightful personality, from the intense red cherry bouquet to the culinary herbs and blackberry and raspberry on the palate. There's tannic tension and bright acidic freshness, and new oak plays no obvious part. Something for now or for the cellar. A serious wine of great utility. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 13.5%



93

Cremisan, Baladi, Bethlehem, West Bank 2016

£19.95 **32°-34° Wines**

Baladi means 'of the village', and that's what this is: a charming, if somewhat rustic wine with a lot of personality. Along with its stablemate varieties *(see p128)*, Baladi is a work in progress, but it's very characterful: aromas of grilled meat and herbs, delicate red-berried fruit, and it is notably fresh for a native black grape of this region. There's something wonderfully old-fashioned about it. **Drink** 2023-2027 **Alc** 12%



92

Segal, Levant Argaman, Judean Hills 2021

£12.50-£15.35 (2020) **Alexander Hadleigh, Amathus Drinks, Cambridge Wine Merchants, Just in Cases, Liberty Wines, Noble Green, Toscanaccio, Vinvm, Wine Direct**

Argaman (crossing of Sousão x Carignan) is certainly at home here. This is not a hugely complex wine, though it possesses a great deal of charm and complexity. Tart black cherry wins out over red and black berries; freshness, texture, fruit charm and intensity. Roast meats, barbecue or hearty vegetarian bakes. **Drink** 2023-2025 **Alc** 13.5%



92

Yatir, Forest, Judean Hills 2018

£68.99 **Amazon, Hedonism, Susser Wine Shop, The Grapevine, The Wine Cellar**

This Cabernet Sauvignon-Petit Verdot-Cabernet Franc is from vineyards in the far south of the Judean Hills, closest to the Negev desert. While quite fragrant and minty on the nose, the palate is somewhat austere at present. However, the hints of blackcurrant, pepper and violet point to a wine that's got the credentials to develop gracefully. It needs time, but the wait will be worth it. **Drink** 2023-2024 **Alc** 14.5%



92

Carmel, Signature Single Vineyards Concrete Syrah, Upper Galilee 2019

£39.99 **32°-34° Wines, The Grapevine, The Wine Barrel, The Wine Cellar**

The savoury character of Syrah is here, boasting smoke, tar and garrigue herbs. So too is the charming blackberry fruit, as you expect. Tannic tension, but no obvious new wood. This wine is proof that Rhône grapes are on the march in Israel for good reason. I particularly like its savoury weave. It will develop, but is providing food-friendly drinking now. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 14% D



91