



Written by

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A collection of Israeli wines

TASTING ARTICLES ISRAEL

Julia has written the introductions to the profiles of the four very different Israeli wineries that produced the 26 wines we happen to have tasted reasonably recently. They range from the barely acceptable to the seriously inspiring.

For a history of wine in Israel and detailed profiles of almost all Israeli wineries, see *The Wine Route of Israel*, by Eliezer Sacks, Yaron Goldfisher and Adam Montefiore (Cordinata 2012).



SEAHORSE WINES

A relatively new **boutique winery** (annual production around 10,000 cases) established by filmmaker Ze'ev Dunie (pictured here) in Moshav Bar Giora in the Jerusalem Hills. His desire to make wine was ignited by his cinematic love story about the Israeli wine industry, *Lying Down in a Cool Dark Place*. He gained experience working at the Tzora winery with established winemaker Ronnie James. Just about everything is done by hand, including the labelling. Dunie specialises in Syrah and Zinfandel but is keen to see a wider range of varieties in Israel and eschews the addition of tannins and enzymes as well as the use of oak chips.

- **Seahorse Wines, James Chenin Blanc 2012 Samson**

39 year-old dry-farmed vineyard. Extended lees contact after barrel fermentation and ageing in French oak for nine months.

The leesiness is very obvious but not too much. No one could possibly guess blind where this wine comes from. It's so ripe that it seems very slightly sweet but there is excellent, well-integrated acidity too. Great balance and very appetising. Crisp melon and passion fruit flavours but nothing industrial or out of place. Very bright fruit.

Drink 2014-2016

16

- **Seahorse Wines, Off Dry Chenin Blanc 2012 Samson**

A little heavy but with lots of interest. The sweetness is a tad obvious but there is real density.

Drink 2013-2015

15.5

- **Seahorse Wines, Lennon 2010 Judean Hills**

Very low yielding blend of 75% Zinfandel, 12.5% Petite Sirah, 12.5% Mourvedre aged in American oak barrels for 15 months. Unfiltered. Dedicated to John L.

Blackish crimson. Impressive freshness despite the alcohol level. Lots of personality and red pepper notes on extremely rich fruit. Pretty impressive! Great persistence. A dreg lasted well in an opened bottle for five days.

15%

Drink 2013-2019

16.5

- **Seahorse Wines, Antoine 2009 Judean Hills**

60% Syrah, 25% Grenache, 15% Mourvèdre blend aged for 18 months in French oak barrels.

Pale crimson. Very pale rim. Very sweet, appealing nose. Fully evolved and integrated. The fruit tastes very much the product of a dry climate but has lots of friendly personality and is nothing remotely like anything industrial. Just a little alcohol heat on the end but nothing excessive. Good freshness and lift. Lots of fun and distinction. Clearly hand-made. But I don't think it has the concentration to last for years and years.

14.5%

Drink 2012-2017

16.5

- **Seahorse Wines, Underground 2008 Judean Hills**

Very rich and intense and sweet this is far from sickly. Bright red berry flavours suggest it may be Zinfandel (the back label is only in Hebrew but later research shows it to be, in this vintage, a blend of 66% Petite Sirah, 17% Syrah and 17% Cabernet Sauvignon). Very well balanced indeed and wonderfully confident. Needs to be approached carefully in view of the alcohol but it is dangerously easy to drink. Lots of refreshment but it doesn't taste as though it has been acidified. Well done! Heavy bottle deposit.

15%

Drink 2011-2020

17

- **Seahorse Wines, Antoine Syrah 2005 Judean Hills**

Really interesting wine that is not like anything else - and all the better for it. Obviously dry-grown fruit and recognisably very ripe Syrah but not heavy and not too hot or sweet. Good balance and richness. Tiny production and, I suspect, a sky-high price. But it's lovely to discover such an unusual, artisanal wine that is not trying to copy and archetype. A herbal note. Such complexity. Bravo!

Drink 2010-2020

17.5

CARMEL

Founded as a co-operative in the 1880s with funding from Baron Edmond de Rothschild, the pioneer of the modern Israeli wine industry, Carmel is the largest wine producer in the country (c 13 million bottles per annum) and the largest producer of kosher wine in the world. They have two large wineries: Zichron Ya'acov on the southern slopes of Mount Carmel overlooking the Mediterranean - the biggest winery in Israel - and Rishon Le Zion just south of Tel Aviv. In addition, they have the smaller Kayoumi cellar closer to the vineyards in Upper Galilee in the north. Yatir in the north-eastern Negev in the south is a wholly owned subsidiary of Carmel (see below). They make a huge range of wines in just about every style and price category (see their website for more details). In the last decade much more attention has been given to quality, and Carmel continued its pioneering role by being the first to plant vineyards in the Negev desert.

- **Carmel, Selected Sauvignon Blanc 2013 Galilee**

Utterly recognisable varietal aromas with good fruit on the mid palate. I'm sure if I were in Israel I would lap up the combination of freshness and fruit this offers. It is not bone dry and presumably has acid added, but it is well done.

12.5%

Drink 2014-2015

£9.99 RRP

15.5

- **Carmel, Private Collection Chardonnay 2013 Galilee**

Unoaked. Salty and broad. Refreshing and not heavy. I assume that this had to be picked relatively early and depends for its freshness on very skilful work on the lees (or, then again, I could be completely wrong!). Anyway, the end result is very creditable. Again, as with the Sauvignon, I'd be delighted to drink this in Israel but I suspect it will be a bit more difficult to convince the great wide wine world outside Israel to pay for it. A little chewy on the end.

13%

Drink 2014-2016

£12.99 RRP

15.5

- **Carmel, Selected Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 Shomron**

Mid crimson. Not that dense a colour. Light nose. Pretty tart finish and not that much fruit weight on the palate. But correct and fresh. Apparently this unoaked brand is a best seller in Israel.

14.5%

Drink 2014-2015

£9.99 RRP

15

- **Carmel, Private Collection Merlot 2012 Galilee**

This was aged for eight months in a mix of tank, French and American barrels.

There seems to me to be a hint of dank wood on the nose of this. Good fruity palate and a little concentration and structure but the tannins are a bit raw. You'd want to eat something to distract from the rather rasping finish. Somehow I can't put hummus out of my mind...

14.5%

Drink 2015-2016

£12.99 RRP

15

- **Carmel, Private Collection Cabernet Sauvignon 2012 Galilee**

Aged for eight months in tanks, and American and French oak barrels.

Lively crimson. As with the Merlot, the oak does not smell 100% appetising; there is something a bit dank about it. Firm fruity attack and, unexpectedly, the tannins seem a little more friendly than on the Merlot. Just a tad skinny on the end. This is on the cusp of a score of 14.5 because of the nose.

14.5%

Drink 2014-2016

£12.99 RRP

15

- **Carmel, Single Vineyard Sumaka Cabernet Sauvignon 2010 Galilee**

Aged in French oak barrels for 16 months. Dark purplish crimson. Very correct if a bit rigid. Marked acidity which is a bit unexpected. (I tasted it alongside a 2010 red bordeaux retailing at around £22 and it lacked a bit of breadth.) But it is serious and refreshing, even if to be avoided without food. A balsamic note. It may well mellow.

14.5%

Drink 2015-2019

£29.99 RRP

15.5

- **Carmel, Limited Edition 2010 Upper Galilee**

54% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Petit Verdot, 15% Merlot, 3% Cabernet Franc, 3% Malbec - a real Bordeaux blend! Each grape variety was vinified and aged separately for 16 months in French oak barrels.

Mid crimson. Very much more interesting on the nose than the Single Vineyard Cabernet. Round and creamy textured initially although it finished less than opulently. There is lift, though, and no one could object to this well-balanced blend. I think it could perhaps have been more sumptuous with finer oak.

14.5%

Drink 2014-2020

£49.99 RRP

16

- **Carmel, Single Vineyard, Kayoumi Vineyard Shiraz 2010 Upper Galilee**

In French oak for 15 months. Mid crimson. Light, rather smudgy nose. Lively and with some sweet savoury oaky notes. Fresh and clean. Complete - no holes on the palate. Good balance; certainly not heavy, but not skinny either. Lightly leathery.

14.5%

Drink 2014-2018

£29.99 RRP

16

- **Carmel, Mediterranean 2010 Upper Galilee**

Very heavy broad bottle. 28% Shiraz, 24% Carignan, 24% Petit Verdot, 18% Petite Sirah, 3% Viognier. 'Small' French oak barrels for 16 months.

Dark crimson. Quite an intriguing nose. There is some sweetness at first and then a little bit of acidity at the end. Definite palate weight but good mastery of oak. (None of these wines is over-oaked.) Quite substantial, verging on heavy, with some sort of spicy quality to it that is almost like cinnamon oil. Well-judged blend.

14.5%

Drink 2014-2018

£39.99 RRP

16

- **Carmel, Single Vineyard Late Harvest Gewurztraminer 2009 Galilee**

Half tapered bottle. Very strong Gewurz nose and admirable balance of sweetness and acid. Still very lively and without excess oiliness. Very successful. I would absolutely hate to be given this blind....

11.5%

Drink 2013-2016

16.5

YATIR

Situated in Tel Arad in the Negev, the winery was built in 2000 as a partnership between local growers and Carmel and is run independently of the parent company. It produces around 150,000 bottles a year. Winemaker Eran Goldwasser trained at Adelaide University and worked several vintages in Australia before returning to Israel to work for Carmel. Yatir own 45 ha (111 acres) of vineyard, planted in 1996, at around 2,700 ft (900 m) elevation and surrounded by the Yatir Forest at the southern tip of the Judean Hills, making it considerably cooler than the rest of the Negev.

• Yatir, Forest 2010 Judean Hills

This is the top label of Yatir, a label owned by Carmel but managed independently. 67% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Petit Verdot, 8% Merlot.

Mid crimson. Pale rim. Racy, almost fragile fruit with some sweetness on the front palate and very chewy tannins. This is very punchy, full-on wine. A little ungracious but has lots of impact. This would sing out over any barbecue! Quite impressive persistence. If it's power you're after, go for this.

15%

Drink ??

£49.99 RRP

15.5

• Yatir 2009 Judean Hills

44% Shiraz, 34% Merlot, 22% Cabernet Sauvignon.

Lightish crimson. The fruit seems if anything to be fading on this one. It's a bit attenuated. Lacking a clear focus. But it is clean and fresh, if unappetisingly and awkwardly scrawny. Not nearly as appealing as its 2009 stablemates labelled Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

14%

Drink 2011-2014

£33.99 RRP

14.5

• Yatir Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 Judean Hills

85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Malbec, 7% Cabernet Franc.

Dark, purplish crimson. Much more appetising and focused than the Shiraz/Merlot/Cabernet blend. Good vibrant aromatic attack and real substance on the palate. Pure and fresh. Not the subtlest wine but textbook Cabernet. Good, positive finish and still with lots of life in it. Really vibrant.

14%

Drink 2013-2018

£33.99 RRP

16

- **Yatir Syrah 2009 Judean Hills**

Aged for 12 months in oak barrels. Brownish crimson with a pale rim. Rather toasty-sweet and appetising. Medium palate weight. The merest hint of BandAid, and a fresh finish. Very ample on the palate. Still some energy. Maybe could do with a little more exposure to oxygen during élevage?

14.5%

Drink 2014-2018

£33.99 RRP

16

SPHERA

A new and exclusively white-wine project by Doron Rav Hon, whom I met some years ago when he was the winemaker at Ella Valley. He buys grapes from growers he has known a long time, mainly in Upper Galilee and the Judean Hills. For now he is focused on Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, Pinot Gris and Riesling but his new plantings include Chenin as well. He describes his philosophy as 'Early vintage, low sugar, no acidification, no malolactic fermentation. Minimum intervention in the process. Fermentation and ageing partly in oak and partly in stainless steel, with fine lees.' Wishing to avoid big wines, he aims for a style that is 'pure, tasty and elegant'. 2013 was a very good vintage, apparently, and these wines represent an exciting new start for this gifted winemaker. Current production is around 17,000 bottles. Labels and website are appropriately and attractively minimalist.

- **Sphera, White Concepts Riesling 2013 Israel**

Only 1,100 bottles produced (sold out). First vintage of Riesling. One site, all in stainless steel. RS 14 g/l.

A little bit of residual CO₂. Lemon and lime fruit at first but the fruit is subtle and combined with a slaty aroma that is so Riesling. Medium dry, refined, tense but full-flavoured in the mouth and excellent length. I think I would like it a tiny bit drier for better balance but a great wine for a first go at Riesling. More Rheingau than Mosel? (JH)

13%

Drink 2014-2017

16.5

- **Sphera, White Concepts, First Page 2013 Israel**

65% Pinot Gris, 25% Sémillon, 10% Riesling from 3 different plots. Grapes from three different sites. 75% in tank, 25% in oak.

Very distinctive aroma dominated by the light spice and stone fruits of Pinot Gris (more Alsace than northern Italy). But there is also citrus and a delicate floral note and just a hint of creamy oak. Rich on the palate, full bodied but dry. Manages to combine both power and elegance and a long scented aftertaste. (JH)

12.9%

Drink 2014-2016

17

- **Sphera, White Concepts Sauvignon Blanc 2013 Israel**

TA 6.8 g/l. Grapes from a single site. Slow (6-week) fermentation in tank and then 7 months in oak (3rd and 4th use).

On the nose, hard to believe this has had 7 months in oak. Herbal and tangy and a little stony, the oak seems to have added weight rather than any oak flavour, so that there is a richness and depth in the mouth without loss of Sauvignon Blanc's crisp aromatic character, and it's still dry. The aromas are more Loire than NZ but the whole is distinctively itself, with a fine dry texture. Very long and beautifully balanced. (JH)

13%

Drink 2014-2016

17

- **Sphera, White Concepts Chardonnay 2013 Israel**

TA 6.5 g/l. Grapes from three different sites. 70% in tank, 30% in oak for 7 months.

Gently aromatic – green apple, melon and some wild herbs. Terrific restraint even though there is weight on the palate balanced by the freshness that marks all the Sphera wines. Again the oak is very subtle and there's a zesty brightness on the finish – not exactly orange zest and not really spice but something tangy and vibrant. Good length. Like the Sauvignon Blanc, it has an attractive dry, fine-grained texture. (JH)

13%

Drink 2014-2016

17

- **Sphera, White Concepts, White Signature 2012 Israel**

First vintage of this wine (sold out). Bottle no. 1,757 out of 5,066. Intended to be the best of the best in any given year. 70% Chardonnay, 27% Sémillon, 3% Riesling. 100% fermented and aged in oak (15% new) and then 10 months in bottle before release.

Slightly deeper gold than the 2013s. The oak is more evident than on any of the other Sphera wines in this line up but still subtle. A very light touch of struck match, then there's a slight buttery/caramel note which in my opinion does not fit so well with winemaker Rav Hon's generally tighter, crisper style. There's good acidity but overall it is a little too soft. Though this has good length and an excellent citrusy finish. Somehow still tastes like a work in progress – I am not convinced by this blend. Perhaps 2012 was not as fine a vintage as 2013? (JH)

13%

Drink 2013-2015 16.5

RECANATI

Founded in 2000 in the Heffer Valley, close to the coast in the Sharon region north of Tel Aviv, by a group of wine lovers led by Lenny Recanati. Winemaker Gil Shatsberg, a graduate of UC Davis, was also the founder of boutique winery Amphorae. All their wines are 'kosher for Passover'.

- **Recanati, Wild Carignan 2012 Judean Hills**

Assistant winemaker is an MW student, which is how BBR came across this. Dark crimson. You really smell the heat. Lovely texture and dramatic purple fruit with really ripe tannins for once. Very successful. Just a little tart on the end.

14%

Drink 2014-2017

£24.95 Berry Bros & Rudd16

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