

FOOD

We're used to Israeli wine made from French varieties. But what about local grapes?

BY VICTORIA PREVER

YOU'RE TUCKING into a spicy shawarma wrapped in pillowy pitta or perhaps charcoal grilled fish smothered in herbs. Not too heavy but packed with Mediterranean and Middle Eastern flavours. What's the best wine pairing?

According to Yehudah Nahar, co-founder of small boutique Jezreel Winery, what

you want in your glass is a wine that "speaks Hebrew". When I ask what he means by this, he explains it as "a wine that will not taste like any other wine you will have tasted before — one which will instantly be recognisable as coming from Israel."

To make this wine, Nahar and consultant winemaker Ari Erle, have used a hybrid

grape originally created in Israel. It's called the argaman, and is a cross between two grapes — the French carignan and Portuguese souzão. "It was developed originally to produce high yields to make economical wine" explains Nahar. "But now, the vines we're using are 30 or 40 years old and their yield has reduced to 20 percent, which means the quality is far better. It's now good for a premium wine."

Many Israeli winemakers use wine from this grape as a 'filler' to bulk up production, but Nahar — who came to winemaking straight from a course at Tel Hai College — has produced a kosher wine that is made 100 percent from argaman.

"My passion when founding the winery was not just to make high quality wines, but to make wines connected to this place. Argaman is a grape that is truly Israeli. It was created here and is perfect for a hot climate."

According to Nahar, unlike the Bordeaux varieties introduced by the Baron Edmund de Rothschild in the late 19th century which many Israeli wine makers have traditionally used, this grape copes better with the searing Israeli heat. "In August, it keeps its high acidity and low sugar whereas grapes used to a cooler climate will start to produce too much sugar and lose their acid-



Yehudah Nahar (far left) is an argaman fan, while Jeff Morgan is not yet convinced

ity." Without getting too technical, too-sweet wine would need to be counterbalanced by ageing the wine in oak barrels which would make heavy, full bodied wine. "Argaman enables us to make a lighter wine" he says.

Nahar and his team are also using ancient Israeli grape, dibuki, to make a natural sparkling wine. "It has been grown here for thousands of years. The wine we're making is totally new and the whole idea of a light, sparkling wine that's local and suitable to grow in a hot climate is amazing" he says.

Jezreel is not the only winery experimenting with local grape varieties. "A winery called the Cremisan Cellars (owned by Silesian monks) between Bethlehem and Jerusalem has also been making wine with local grapes. Five or six other wineries have used them, including kosher winery, Barkan — which has made a wine from the marawi grape" says Israeli



wine expert, Adam Montefiore. "Some of these wines have scored 90 [out of 100] in the Robert Parker and Spectator wine reviews, which are the premier wine reviews in the world."

But not everyone agrees that Israeli grapes are the way to go. Montefiore says that when English wine critic, Jancis Robinson, tasted wines made with argaman she was underwhelmed. "She recognised that they are rare and interesting, but didn't feel that should be confused for quality. A bit of fun and colour for the Israeli wine industry and not the next best thing" he says.

Other Israeli wine makers are also sceptical, preferring to stick with the French grapes that have been used worldwide. Jeff Morgan of Covenant Wines makes premium wines in California and, since 2013, in Israel. "I used argaman as a blender in some of my earlier vintages. I needed some extra wine and it was lighter and fresher than some of my syrahs. I thought it would add balance and freshness."

Generally though, he prefers to use syrah (shiraz) and viognier — grapes more commonly found in the Rhone Valley. "These varieties seemed to me to be very appropriate to the Israeli terroir. The landscape here reminds me of what you see in the Rhone Valley — deep red, volcanic soil and the limestone outcrops. The Mediterranean climate is similar there. It's also a lot like the landscape in Northern California. The resemblance is astonishing." It was the landscape I saw for myself when I visited Morgan's vines on the Kibbutz Tzivon last summer.

The vines sit in the searing heat under azure skies but Morgan doesn't believe climate should preclude his using European grapes. He and other winemakers use altitude to their advantage. "Our viognier vineyard is in the extreme north on the border with Lebanon which is high, to cooler."

Yakob Oryah of boutique vineyard, Psgagot, is aware of the trend but also unconvinced: "We're searching for our identity and going back to more Mediterranean varieties. So far the results are interesting, but the wine doesn't shine yet. As an industry we're learning how to use these grapes but we're sceptical for two reasons. Firstly, these grapes have not yet been proven to make high end wines; and secondly, consumers are wary of names that they are not familiar with. They are comfortable with cabernet sauvignon and merlot etc, but wary even of proven grapes like carignan and grenache, as they don't know them, so will not buy them."

So Psgagot also focus on the 'safe' grapes like merlot, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc, using them to make blended wines. "It's a balance between making a good wine and a marketable one" he says.

Morgan believes that Israel is on the way to becoming one of the greatest wine making nations in the world. "We're still developing a profound understanding of the terroir in Israel. We've only been doing it for 25 to 30 years in modern Israel — we're only just beginning to hit our stride."

Kedem's K kosher Food and Wine Experience will take place on February 6 at the Sheraton Grand London, Park Lane. www.kfwelondon.com



FABIENNE VINER-LUZZATO'S  
Fruit and nut bread with olive tapenade

► This makes a perfect starter or light lunch for Tu B'Shvat. This is also delicious with labneh, cream cheese or full fat yogurt.

INGREDIENTS

For the bread

275g strong white flour (a bit more if dough is sticky)  
275g strong wholemeal flour (a bit more if dough is sticky)  
14g dried yeast  
380ml warm water  
50g sugar  
15g salt  
125g mixed nuts  
125g dried figs cut in pieces

For the tapenade:

200g pitted black olives  
2 garlic cloves  
2 tbsp capers

Salt and pepper  
Juice of half a lemon  
60ml olive oil plus some to drizzle

METHOD

● For the bread: Mix the flour, yeast and water until they form a neat ball. Knead the dough on a clean worktop and for about minutes, adding a little flour if it is very sticky.  
● Add the salt the continue to knead for 5 minutes. Add the nuts and dried figs and knead again until the dough is very elastic and springy when prodded — this will take a good 20 minutes by hand in total, less if using a mixer.  
● Leave the dough to rise either on your worktop covered with the bowl or

in a clean bowl covered in cling film for at least 1 ½ to 2 hours (more if you have time) until it at least doubles in size. The temperature of the room has to be warm to help the rising process.  
● Divide the dough into two pieces and shape into loaves. Lay onto an oven tray lined with baking parchment and leave to rise again for at least 30 minutes. Preheat the oven to 200°C.  
● Bake for about 20 minutes until golden brown.  
● For the tapenade: Blitz all the ingredients together in a food processor and serve, drizzled with olive oil, with the bread.

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KFWE19

Three full-bodied Israeli reds to look out for at K kosher Food and Wine Experience 2019

Some recommended blends

► THE wall-to-wall tasting tables at KFWE2019 can make your head spin — before you've drunk a drop. This should be a great show for the Israeli wines, as 2016 was a fantastic vintage. Among the fabulous blends to sniff and swirl, these are particularly worth seeking out:

● Flam Noble 2014

A powerful, full-bodied red with plenty of fruit from this family-owned winery in the heart of the Judean Hills where they have made wine for 21 years. This is one of their premium wines.

● Castel Grand Vin 2016

A mix of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and petit verdot from another family winery with a long history — founded in 1992. It's the first vintage to come out of the winery's new state-of-the-art premises and promises to be a cracker.

● Five Stones - Virtuous 2016

Another blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, malbec and petit verdot but from a new boutique winery. Five Stones — named for the smooth stones David picked up when fighting Goliath — has been founded by a group of experienced wine makers.

With kosher winemakers exhibiting from across the globe, there will be plenty to try at this year's show.



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