Michael Greenwald, a retired Philadelphia attorney, remembers squeezing his first trip to Israel, in 1962, into little more than a day. When he returned in 2019 for an intensive 10-day tour, he set aside a day solely for visiting Tzora Vineyards, a boutique winery near Jerusalem.

“I had read about this winery in Wine Spectator a few years ago, and I knew I had to taste its wines,” said Greenwald, a devoted oenophile. The magazine’s October 2016 issue, with a cover story on Israel, had ranked Tzora’s wines (tzoravineyards.com) as 90 or higher, out of 100.

Greenwald was not disappointed. After hearing a detailed presentation and sampling Tzora’s offerings, he came away with two bottles of Judean Hills red, a full-bodied blend with an aroma of fresh blackberries and ground black pepper.

Tzora’s success is part of a wider trend that is shaking up the tourism industry. As Israel’s wine producers have dramatically multiplied since the 1990s and the quality of their varietals and blends has soared, tastings and vineyard tours have become an increasingly popular way to experience six distinct wine regions: the Golan Heights, Galilee, Samaria, Judean Hills, Judean foothills and the Negev.

As of 2018, Israelis, including some in the Golan Heights and the West Bank, operated four large wineries (each producing more than five million bottles per year); 12 medium-size ones (more than one million bottles); and over 230 boutique wineries (up to 100,000 bottles). Many offer a tasting experience.

“We’ve seen steady growth,” said Alon Yitzhaki, a licensed tour guide and sommelier who co-founded Israel Wine Tour (israelwincetour.co.il) 10 years ago. “The world is gradually learning about the quality of Israeli wine.”

Yitzhaki, 44, gives 15 to 25 evening, single-day or overnight wine tours a month, opting for boutique wineries over larger establishments.

A favorite stop on many of his tours is Agur Winery (agurwines.com), in the Judean foothills. Founder and winemaker Shuki Yashuv has post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from his service during the Yom Kippur War, speaks seven languages, is a carpenter and a philosopher and “has been making kosher wine for 20 years,” said Yitzhaki, noting that Yashuv is a complete atheist. At Agur, visitors sample Yashuv’s various blends either indoors, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling racks of whites and reds as well as repurposed wooden barrels, or alfresco, sitting at picnic tables amid simple, scenic landscaping.

Wine and winemaking have deep roots in Jewish tradition. The biblical record goes back to Noah, whose vineyard is the first mentioned. In Deuteronomy, vines are among the blessings promised the children of Israel if they obey God’s commandments. Wine figured prominently as a Temple offering and in ceremonial practice as well. Ancient wine presses have been uncovered in archaeological digs throughout Israel, testimony to a flourishing wine industry that continued for centuries.

But winemaking had shrunk to a small scale by the 19th century, when philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore urged its revival. Baron Edmond de Rothschild—owner of the Château Lafite fame in France—urged its revival. Baron Edmond de Rothschild—owner of the Château Lafite family in Europe—started producing good quality dry red wine only after 1980, which was not known in Israel.”

Before then, according to Erin Pick, the country’s only Master of Wine (a coveted title bestowed by the British Institute of Masters of Wine), Tzora’s success spurred existing wineries to improve. Tzora, founded in the Judean Hills in 1993, was among Israel’s earliest boutique wineries. Its founder, Ronnie James, introduced to Israel the importance of terroir—the various aspects of the vineyard, including the altitude, humidity, soil composition and flowers. These are especially important for Tzora, an estate winery, which means that it produces wine solely from its own grapes, grown in especially picturesque terraces that hug the steep, rocky slopes. Tzora also markets its wines together with three neighboring labels—Domaine du Castel, Flam and Sphera—as the Judean Hills Quartet, reviving a 2,000-year-old winemaking tradition in the area. In 2002, Tzora became kosher in order to increase sales. There is a demand in Israel and in Jewish communities abroad for fine kosher wine, so carrying a hechsher enlarges the potential market. Consequently, the switch means that Pick, who is Jewish but not observant, is no longer allowed to touch or even pour the wine.

So what makes a wine kosher? From the time the grapes are crushed, the juice and ultimately the wine may be touched or poured only by religiously observant Jews. Mevushal wines are those that have undergone flash pasteurization and therefore may be poured (for example, at a catered event) by anyone.

By Esther Hecht | March/April 2020 | hadassahmagazine.org
According to Zahi Dotan, manager of the Israel Wine and Grape Board, 95 percent of the 40 million bottles of wine produced in Israel annually is kosher, as are all the large and mid-size wineries. Exported wines are almost exclusively kosher. Tsora, however, wants to be known “as a winery that makes good wine that happens to be kosher,” said Pick. And the *Wine Spectator* rankings definitely helped, boosting visits to the winery, according to Pick. Among Tsora’s varietals are the Judean Hills red that Greenwald bought; Judean Hills white, a blend of chardonnay and sauvignon blanc grown on old terraces in shallow terra rosa, a red clay soil, with a subsoil of limestone; and a dessert wine for which the grapes are harvested in July and then frozen.

**THE POLITICS OF WINE PRODUCTION**

Some of the wines marketed as originating in Israel are produced, wholly or in part, in the Golan Heights and the West Bank. Such marketing has stoked activists of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Most recently, in March 2019, an official statement from the movement called for tourists to “avoid…wine tasting in illegal settlements.”

But sometimes boycotts backfire. In March 2019, a Dutch woman tweeted to protest that wine from the Efrat Winery, in the Judean Hills, was being marketed in a Dutch-based chain as a product of Israel. “Efrat and Judean Hills are in occupied Palestinian land,” she tweeted, according to a Jewish Telegraphic Agency report.

According to Alon Yitzhaki, co-founder of Israel Wine Tour, some tourists say they will drink wine from the Golan Heights because that area is under Israeli law, but not wine from the West Bank.

In the north of Israel, Tulip Winery (tulip-winery.co.il) is located in Kfar Tikva, a pastoral hilltop community of adults with developmental and emotional disabilities. The Itzhaki family of nearby Tivon, which founded the kosher winery in 1964, wanted to produce quality wine but also to create a socially responsible business, said Sivan Netzer, director of Tulip’s visitor center. Eight community members are employed in the winery; the oldest is 71.

“Most visitors don’t know about the village” in advance, Netzer said, noting that while Tulip is open about it, they “don’t use it as a marketing tool.”

The winery stands on its own merits, having won, among other awards, a gold medal for its Syrah Reserve 2014 from the Syrah du Monde in France. According to Netzer, Tulip was the first in Israel to blend gewürztraminer and sauvignon blanc. And in 2007, he obtained a license to produce wine in the desert, founder Eran Raz, 51, recounted over a crisp chardonnay. In 2007, he obtained a plot of land and planted has first vines. But between the dream and its realization came a history lesson. Raz had failed to take into account the flash floods and the reason that ancient crops were planted on terraces, which level the land and retain water.

After the first winter, he had to build new terraces.

But his troubles did not end there. It turned out that his plot of land was in the middle of a smuggling route, and the Bedouin smugglers wanted him. “I had to sleep in the vineyard,” he recalled.

The smugglers offered “protection,” but he refused. Eventually, his persistence, the influx of other farmers from the nearby town of Mitzpe Ramon and completion of the wall Israel built on the Egyptian border to prevent illegal entry resolved that problem.

Raz’s three children help out, but the summer harvest is done by youngsters from Mitzpe Ramon who are paid by the crate. Every February, he hires soldiers who have completed their compulsory military service and who get a bonus from the state for working in agriculture for at least six months.

By 2014, Raz was producing his first wine. In 2019, he produced 55,000 bottles—red, white and rose—but he must hit 100,000 to turn a profit. Meanwhile, the number of wineries in the area is growing.

To reach Nana’s rustic one-room tasting center, visitors drive off the main road and through flat vineyards—rows of surprisingly verdant vegetation set off against the dusty brown of the surrounding desert. A grove of fruit trees encircles the simple structure. In addition to catering events, Raz is building accommodations for overnight visitors—one room at a time—until his vision of combining wine and tourism becomes a reality.

**EXPERIENCE THE BIG PLAYERS**

Reserve wine-tastings and tours in advance.

**Carmel Winery,** 135 years old and one of Israel’s first modern wineries, offers several options, all of which include a tour of its Zichron Ya’akov facilities, a film and a wine-tasting experience (carmelwines.co.il/en).

**Barkan Winery,** near Kibbutz Hulda, west of Jerusalem, crafts individually tailored experiences, including a terroir workshop and a wine night with a choice of refreshments (barkan-winery.co.il/en).

**Golan Heights Winery,** in Katzrin, operates half a dozen tours, one of which includes a personalized meal and another that includes a visit to a vineyard (golanwines.co.il).

**Dalton Winery,** in the northern Galilee, produces one million bottles a year with grapes grown in varied combinations of soils, including limestone and rich, heavy basalt. The family-owned winery conducts daily tours (dalton-winery.com).

**Tabor Winery,** in the Galilee, south of Haifa, was established in 1959 by four families with vineyard experience. In 2012, the winery embraced progressive environmental standards (taborwinery.co.il).

**Tshibi,** in Binyamina, south of Haifa, produces one million bottles of wine annually and distills prize-winning brandy. The family-owned business also creates gourmet chocolates and other fine foods, and operates two restaurants as well as a wine- and chocolate-tasting center (tshibi.com).

**THE POLITICAL TRAVEL BRAND**

**Eddie Gerald/Alamy**

**Golan Winery** Producing good quality dry red wines in Israel’s north since 1983

**MARCH/APRIL 2020 | 44 | hadassahmagazine.org**