

## CULTURE

### Israeli family winery competes with the best

By Avi Hein February 25, 2007

When you mention Israel, top quality wine is generally not the first thing that comes to people's minds. Yet, a short ride from Jerusalem in the scenic Judean Hills, resides one of Israel's best kept secrets: a world class winery.

The Domaine du Castel winery located in Moshav Ramat Raziel is easy to miss. However, in this small family-run business, some of the world's best wines are produced in the same hills in which wine was produced in Biblical times.

Wine has been grown in the land of Israel for thousands of years. The Bible often refers to the abundant wine harvests of Israel. Baron de Rothschild created the modern Israeli wine industry in the late nineteenth century, opening up two wineries in Zichron Ya'akov and Rishon Lezion.

Today the country plays host to 150 wineries of all sizes producing wines of all tastes and prices. The Domaine du Castel winery, named after a Crusader fortress located nearby in the Judean Hills, was founded by Eli Ben-Zaken in 1988.

Ben-Zaken, born in Egypt of Egyptian and Italian parents, was raised in Italy and England. In 1970, after a short stint in Israel volunteering during the Six Day War, he immigrated to Israel. Originally involved in agriculture, he later opened a restaurant in Jerusalem, but his heart was set on getting back to the land. Initially a hobby, Ben-Zaken planted his first vineyard in an old chicken coop.

A bottle of the first wine, of 1992 vintage, was given in 1995 to Serena Sutcliffe MW, the head of Sotheby's Wine Department in England. According to Ben-Zaken, Sutcliffe's reply changed the course of Israeli wine.

She called it "absolutely terrific" and "quite unlike other Israeli wines," recalls Ben-Zaken, as he toured his winery. With that response, Ben-Zaken knew he had a winning wine and decided to take a risk and pursue winemaking professionally. He planted more vineyards, converted the ramshackle chicken coop into a beautiful winery and sent his son, who had been touring in Europe, to France to learn the art of wine making.

"Nobody believed that Israel was a country where you could get the price that allows you to invest in wine, so Israel was out of this game [producing high quality wines]," noted Ben-Zaken over a sample of recent vintages in the winery's tasting room. "I think we showed the industry that there is a market [for top quality wine]. If you make very high quality wines, you get people to buy it."

Rothschild's efforts back in the late 1800s led to the formation of Israel's first winery Carmel Mizrahi. By the turn of the century, Carmel produced the first Israeli wine to win a medal at a wine show. Yet by 1960s, Israeli wine suffered from the reputation of producing wine too thick and sweet to appeal to wine connoisseurs. Instead, most Israeli wine was associated with sacrament and was used primarily for ritual purposes, giving kosher wine a bad name.

It was only in the mid-1970s that Israel began moving towards higher quality wines. The rapid improvement came, however, in the early 1980s, with the formation of the Golan Heights Winery, the first winery to grow vineyards on the Golan Heights, which imported expertise from California and brought state-of-the-art technology to Israeli winemaking.

Until the early 1990s however, most Israeli wineries were industrial, aimed at the masses, and not the enthusiast. It's only been in the last decade that boutique wineries began to take root, and Castel is most widely credited for Israel's boutique revolution.

"I was here striving to make the best possible wine in Israel as a Zionist, to show the world that we have culture and quality," Ben-Zaken said.

At Domaine du Castel, all of the grapes in the vineyard are handpicked. It is the only winery in Israel to use the French method. This "Old World" method of harvesting grapes means that each vine is in competition with one another and thus a better grape results.

By planting a high density of vines, but encouraging a low yield, higher quality grapes are ensured. Domaine du Castel is the only Israeli winery to use this approach, which is favored by the top wineries around the world.

Ben-Zaken strives for the best in all things. He imports specialized equipment not available in Israel such as new French oak barrels (in order to ensure top quality, all of Castel's barrels are retired after three years of use) and Portuguese corks.

The results speak for themselves. Castel has repeatedly been recognized by international critics. Ben-Zaken's wine is the first Israeli wine selected as wine of the month by *Decanter*, the world's premier wine magazine. It is also the first Israeli wine to receive 90 points in *Wine Spectator*, and the only Israeli wine listed in the French Betteane & Desseauve's *The World's Greatest Wines*, where it is favorably compared to the best French wines. It is also the first Israeli wine to be awarded three stars by the wine writer Hugh Johnson (which it has received consistently since 2004).

In 2003, Ben-Zaken decided to make all his wines kosher, saying that he felt bad that not all Jews could appreciate his wine (before it obtained certification).

Since obtaining certification, the winemaking process hasn't changed but Castel was able to hire observant French immigrants who were unable to work in the wine industry in their native France but always dreamed of making good wine. According to Ben-Zaken, Castel is proof that kosher wine can compete on an international level.

Daniel Rogov, Israel's premier wine critic, notes that as Israel produces better wines, "the wines will move off those shelves limited only to kosher holdings and begin to appear in a special Israeli section. Their appeal to the broader population will come from their unique qualities, reflecting their Mediterranean and specifically Israeli source."

Today about a dozen people work at the winery, and it produces 96,000 bottles annually and three different varieties of wine. The Castel Grand Vin, aged 24 months, a premium red wine, is a smooth and luscious mix of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petit Verdot. The "C" is a fine Chardonnay, aged for 12 months, in Castel's underground cellars. The Petit Castel, aged 16 months, also an exquisite red, is a blend of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

When asked what lies ahead for Domaine du Castel, Ben-Zaken laughed and said: "Making better wines"

"I finish making the wine and I already think about the next vintage," he explained. "The best is yet to come."