

# A vineyard near Jerusalem is making wine that can rival France for quality

**E**li Ben-Zaken speaks softly, but there's fire in his eyes. I'm sitting on his small stand, tucked

into a distant corner of the massive wine fair Vinitalv which takes place in Verona each year, and I'm tasting wines that stand comparison with the best the world has to offer. What is most remarkable is that his vineyard isn't in a favoured part of an established wine region, but on a hill 10 miles west of Jerusalem.

It's hard to explain why Eli is at Vinitalv, since demand in Israel for the annual production of 8,000 cases is such that he hardly has any wine left to export. He certainly doesn't seem interested in engaging in the grubby activities of marketing and promotion, indeed, when people approach the stand, he says to me, "Ignore them – they'll go away."

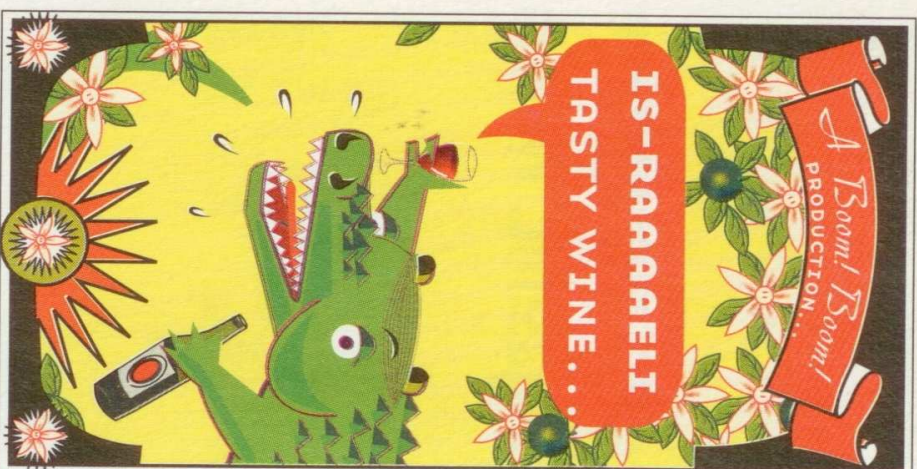
Israeli wines have come a long way since the sickly sweet offerings of the past. Many winemakers have trained and worked overseas, and there are several Chardonnays and Cabernets that wouldn't look out of place alongside wines from California or Australia. But Eli has no time for the New World. He's a Francophile, even going so far as labelling his wine not Judean Hills but Haute-Judée, and calling it Grand Vin, "... just to let everyone know that a lot of effort had been put into making the wine". He hasn't had and formal training. "Once a year, I read Peynaud," he says, referring to *Knowing and Making Wine*, written by the eminent Bordeaux oenologist Professor Emile Peynaud. "Peynaud is my bible. But apart from that, I'm self-taught."

He's also alone in having a serious vineyard in this part of Israel. It was intuition that told him that the slopes around the village of Ramat Raziel would be a good site to plant grapes.

The soils are excellent, as is the climate. Days are generally warm, but low night-time temperatures plus afternoon breezes blowing off the Mediterranean (visible on a clear day) mean that the vines seldom overheat. At present, Eli still buys a few grapes from other growers, but he'll become self-sufficient soon. Then, as his existing vineyards mature, Eli expects his wines to get even better.

It's hard to see how the current range could be improved upon. With its rich citrus and peach flavours, toasty oak and crisp acidity, the 1999 'C' Chardonnay du Castel (£21.30) could pass for a white Burgundy, and should age just as well. Bordeaux is the inspiration for the reds, both blends of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. In the 1998 Petit Castel (£19.65), Merlot is the dominant variety, giving a soft plummy wine with a hint of violets. Its big brother Domaine du Castel (£27.50) is 70 per cent Cabernet and has spent a couple of years in French oak barrels. With its sweet blackcurrant flavours and cedary overtones, it's a dead ringer for a top wine from the Bordeaux commune of St-Julien.

Eli's wine makes a rare and quality addition to the cellar – contact La Maison du Vin 020 8950 6307. **FT**  
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By Simon Woods  
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