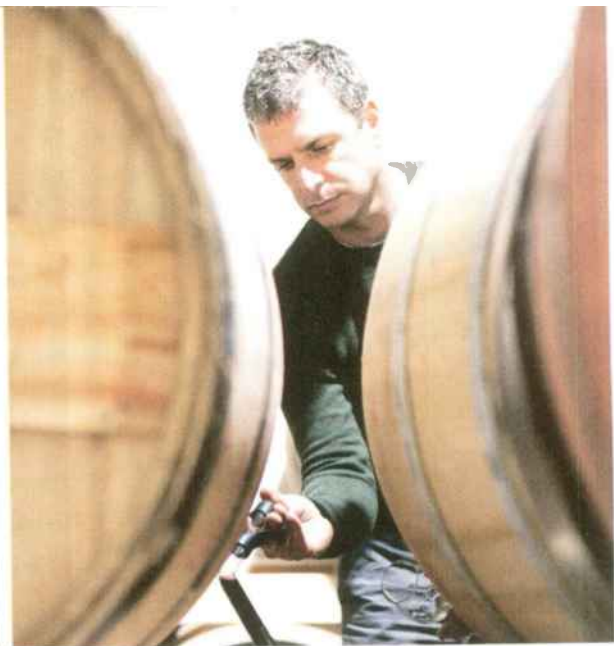




wine talk



An expert's advice

What a wine consultant is and why it makes sense to have one in every winery

■ BY ADAM MONTEFIORE

The idea of a winery making use of an adviser or consultant makes perfect sense. It is a way of importing expertise, filling the gaps in the local winemakers' knowledge and educating them for the future. Some of the winemaking consultants have become so famous that they may even impact the image of the winery they help merely by association, regardless of any discernible improvement in wine quality.

The first famous modern wine consultant was a Frenchman, Prof. Emile Peynaud, who really affected how people made wine worldwide. He was particularly influential in the 1960s and 1970s. This was the first time that wineries seemed to realize they could improve themselves with outside assistance. Peynaud was a real innovator and forerunner of the glut of winemaking consultants that came after.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the term "flying winemaker" came to be used for the first time. It was the term for consultant winemakers that started to make wine in a number of countries. I well remember the surprise at seeing so many Australians making wine in so many wine countries, even in France!

Arguably the most famous wine consultant today is Michel Rolland, who makes wine and consults all over the wine world. He is based in Pomerol in Bordeaux.

Another giant of wine consultancy is Stephane Derenoncourt, also from Bordeaux. He is far more interested in the terroir and

the vineyard than most. Not for him to nose a wine, give a few instructions and then move on to the next winery. He is the ultimate believer that wine is made in the vineyards. Of all the most famous consultants, he has made an impact on the Eastern Mediterranean. He is the consultant for Kavaklidere, the largest and, many would say, the most progressive winery in Turkey. He also consults for Chateau Marsyas in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon and the unique and remarkable Chateau Bargylus in Syria. He is definitely a specialist for the area.

Not all the famous wine consultants are from Bordeaux. The Rolland equivalent in Italy is Riccardo Cotarella. He has had a remarkable effect on the resurgence of Italian wine. I suppose Helen Turley is the most influential consultant in California.

Some of these names give honor to the local wine industry here by being involved. Rolland consults for the beautiful Amphorae Vineyards, situated at Kerem Mahalal in the Mount Carmel foothills. Cotarella advises Cremisan Winery, which makes wine at the Cremisan Monastery close to Bethlehem. Another Californian icon, Zelma Long, has been the consultant for the Golan Heights Winery since 2002.

However, there is nothing new under the sun. The first consultant to an Israeli winery was Charles Mortier, the winemaker of Chateau Lafite in Bordeaux, who advised Carmel Winery in the 1890s. This was a pretty heady beginning for the Israeli wine industry. In those days, Baron Edmond de Rothschild really wanted to make great wine. In reality, his vision for excellence

transpired only 100 years later.

The most influential consultant for an Israeli winery was Peter Stern from California. When Shimshon Welner, the canny first manager of the Golan Heights Winery, decided he would have to import winemaking expertise, he approached Stern. Welner was attracted by Stern's expertise and his Jewish name. In the end, even though Stern was not Jewish, he was employed by Golan for its first 20 years. He ushered in the quality wine revolution to Israel, introducing New World viticulture and vinification techniques.

During this time of modernization, Israeli winemakers themselves began to act as consultants. At the beginning of the boutique winery boom, Yair Margalit, of the famous Margalit Winery, was the father confessor and consultant to a number of the new start-up wineries.

Arkadi Papikian was the first local winemaker to become a full-time consultant. He made aliya in 1991 and initially worked at Rishon Lezion Cellars. Then for a period he became winemaker for Dalton Winery in the Upper Galilee. In 2001, he left and decided to go it alone and became a roving consultant to wineries such as Adir, Odem Mountain, Or Haganuz, Somek and Zion. He still consults but is now also the winemaker at Amphorae.

Itai Lahat is the new star in the wine consultant firmament. Young, good-looking and ever so well qualified, he assists wineries that crisscross the map of Israel. He has studied finance, marketing, horticulture and oenology. This means he is equally at

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home in the vineyard, winery or in front of a balance sheet. This is a versatility of expertise that sets him apart as a consultant.

He graduated from Adelaide University, cut his teeth working at the Israel Wine Institute, and then worked for seven years as a winemaker for Barkan, Israel's second-largest winery. During that time he was also their viticulturist looking after and gaining valuable experience about vineyards from the deepest Negev to the Golan Heights.

Unlike many who take from the industry, he is also prepared to give something back. Since 2010 he has been running the Tel Hai College Cellar Master Course, one of the most professional wine courses in the country. He also organizes the annual Rosh Pina Wine Conference, which is probably the most complete gathering of wine industry professionals.

I asked him if a consultant winemaker can be too powerful, making globalized same-ish wine, but on a national scale. He said he was a hands-on consultant but only working as part of a team. He said he never put himself at the front and that winemak-

ing was all about place, not just person. He believes the Rhone and southern Rhone should be the inspirations for Israeli wine. Syrah and Mediterranean-style blends are wines that Israel produces to an international standard.

Without doubt, Lahat has made a difference. Wineries for which he is a consultant include Agur, Bazelet Hagolan, Gush Etzion, Kishor and Tzuba. I myself have noticed the change in the wines of Bazelet Hagolan. Once rich, ripe and opulent, they have suddenly become more elegant. Also the improvement in Gush Etzion wines since his involvement is indicative of how helpful a good consultant can be.

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The White Festival

The excellent annual White Wine Festival is due to take place in the Herzliya Pituah Marina. This is already the sixth year of this fun, successful event, but now the festival is heralding a noticeable trend back to white wines among Israeli wine consumers. White wines are more difficult to make than red, but they are more suitable for our climate and for matching with food than red wines.

Recent years have seen a discernible revolution in the quality of Israeli white wines. This popular festival gives visitors the opportunity to taste a wide range of white wines, whether they are dry, semi-dry, sweet or sparkling, Israeli or imported. There will be many wines on offer. Israeli wineries of all sizes are attending, and Israel's major importers will be represented as well.

The festival is organized by Haim Gan of Ish Anavim (the Grape Man). Gan has been one of the pioneers of Israeli wine for many years, organizing competitions, wine education courses and many other wide-ranging wine-based activities.

It is not by accident that this festival falls just before Shavuot. During Shavuot, it is customary to eat dairy products, so wine and cheese parties are a very suitable way to celebrate the festival. Contrary to what is normally understood, white wines generally accompany cheeses far more successfully than red wines. So the White Festival is a wonderful opportunity to sample the large variety of white wines available.

The White Festival takes place at the Herzliya Marina on May 28 and 29 from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. The admission is NIS 69, which is extremely good value.

- Adam Montefiore

The favorites

These are some of the samples Itai Lahat gave me to taste.

Tzuba Semillon/ Sauvignon Blanc, Tzuba Winery 2012. NIS 65 to NIS 70.

A blend of 50% Semillon and 50% Sauvignon Blanc. It is lovely to see Semillon come back in quality wines. The nose is Semillon, the taste very Sauvignon. A good texture, and the finish is clean and refreshing.



herbal backdrop, and part crushed almonds. The wine has an oily texture and good minerality. Nicely balanced, with a long finish.

Ortal Viognier, Ortal Winery 2012 (not kosher). NIS 115

This is made from Viognier grown in the northern Golan Heights. This has a tantalizing and attractive nose traditional to the best Viogniers. A delicate combination of white peach and apricot. It follows through with a full mouth feel.



Layam, Agur Winery 2011. NIS 105

A blend of Syrah 50% and Mourvedre 50%. Medium bodied, bright and refreshing. Cherry berry fruit. Good acidity. This is the sort of wine that I refer to as the new Israeli Mediterranean style blend, and I love it.



'The Lone Oak' Cabernet Franc, Gush Etzion Winery 2008. NIS 110

This is a blend of 85% Cabernet Franc and 15% Merlot. Definitely Cabernet Franc. Aromatic, full of blackberry fruit, quite oaky with a green herbaceous character. It has a long finish.



Lahat Lavan 2012 (not kosher). NIS 130

A blend of Roussanne and Viognier. It is Itai Lahat's own wine, with a beautiful label reminiscent of Japanese calligraphy. It has a haunting aroma, part apricot with a