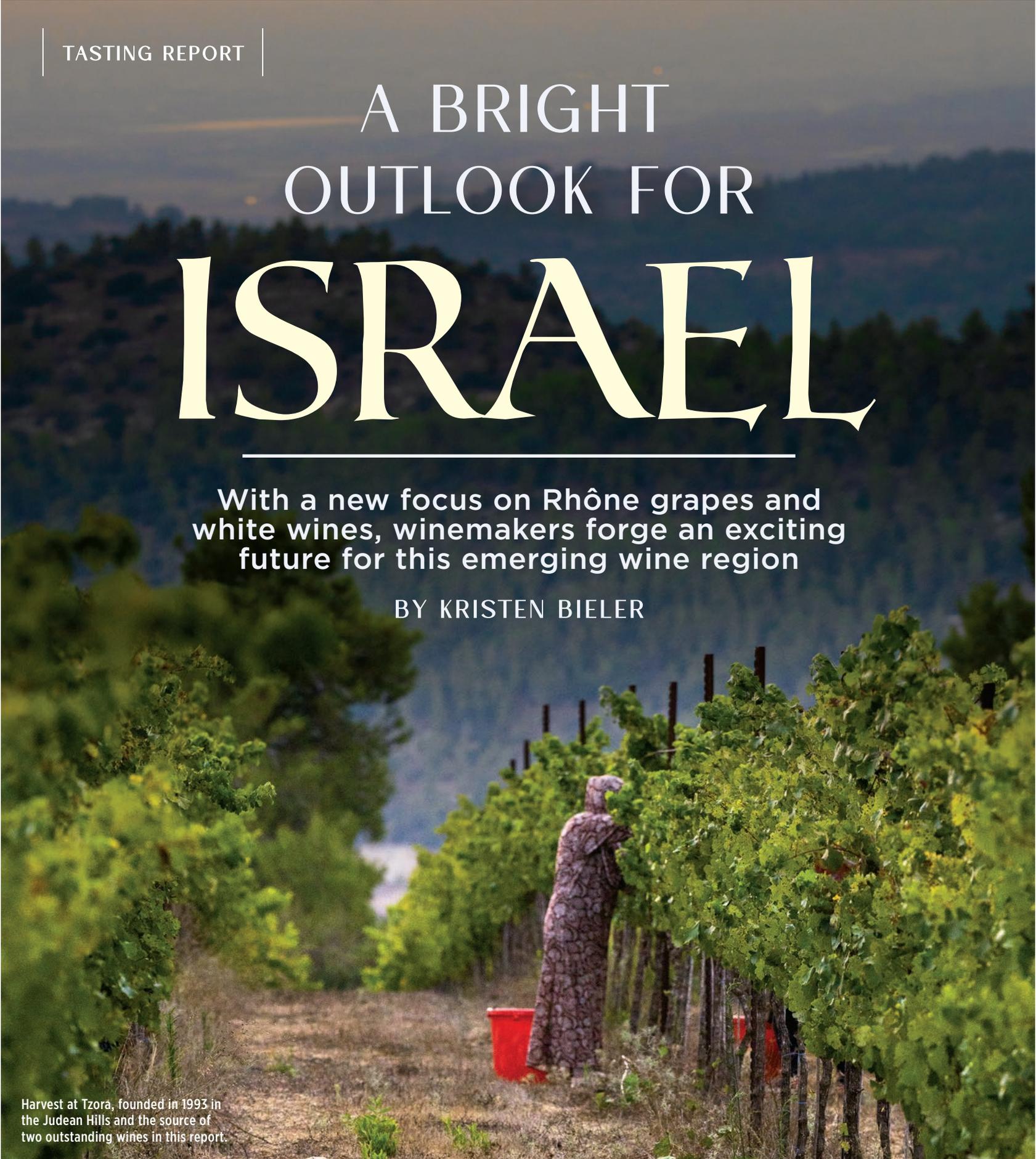


TASTING REPORT

A BRIGHT OUTLOOK FOR ISRAEL

With a new focus on Rhône grapes and white wines, winemakers forge an exciting future for this emerging wine region

BY KRISTEN BIELER



Harvest at Tzora, founded in 1993 in the Judean Hills and the source of two outstanding wines in this report.

Eran Pick was working as a winemaker in Sonoma when a trip home to his native Israel and a visit to Tzora Vineyards in the Judean Hills in 2006 changed his destiny. “Walking through the vineyard, you see it has hallmarks of the greatest vineyards in the world—shallow limestone soils, 60-million-year-old marine fossils, vines growing on rocks—and the Mediterranean, which you can see from the vineyards.”

Pick was hired on the spot by the late Ronnie James, who founded Tzora in 1993. Thus, like so many in Israel’s current generation of winemakers, Pick returned home after years of winemaking abroad armed with knowledge and perspective that has helped chart a new course for this both ancient and emerging region.

“I want to tell the story of a place, not a variety,” explains Pick, who trained at the University of California, Davis, and was Israel’s

first Master of Wine (now joined by Barkan Winery's Ido Lewinsohn). "A grape is a tool to tell the story of a region, and you need the right tool."

He began to transition Tzora's estate plantings to Rhône grapes, increasingly edging out the Bordeaux varieties that Israel's modern wine industry was founded on. "Syrah is a very good variety in our climate; you can harvest when grapes aren't extremely ripe and the tannins aren't harsh," which can sometimes be a problem for Cabernet in Israel, he explains.

Pick also moved away from single-variety wines: "Blends always taste better in our Mediterranean climate. Any wine region below the 45th Parallel should not be doing single-variety wines—just look at France." His Shores red is a blend of Cabernet, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Merlot. He also increased Tzora's white wine production to 35% of its total output.

And he brought in Jean-Claude Berrouet of Château Pétrus as a consultant. "The challenge in Israel is how to have elegance without losing complexity," a trade-off when harvesting early, Pick says. "We need fruit that is perfectly ripe but not too ripe that it loses a sense of place. Jean-Claude helped me find the middle path."

Tzora's pivoting is mirrored throughout Israel, as more producers set their compass toward what their *terroir* does well rather than what they think the world expects of them or what has historically sold well in the market.

"Until 20 years ago or so, what we knew how to do was imitate—Bordeaux, for example—but this new generation has worked harvests around the world, and now there is so much more knowledge and a deep understanding of how to grow vines in our climate," says Aviram Katz, sommelier at HaBasta, a top restaurant in Tel Aviv. "What I'm most surprised and happy about is how great the whites are," says Katz. "Even with our heat, we produce some crisp, fresh, elegant whites without acidification. No one would have imagined that was possible a decade ago."



Winemaker Eli Ben-Zaken (left) and his family, owners of top boutique producer Domaine du Castel.

White wine is the sole focus at Sphera, a new producer launched in the Judean Hills by Doron and Sima Rav Hon with the 2012 vintage. In a land of red wine, which represents over 70% of Israel's production, the Burgundy-trained Rav Hon outfitted his winery entirely for white wine. He harvests early to retain acidity and employs long fermentations for his creative blends of Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Roussanne and Sémillon. Elegant, concentrated and energetic, Sphera's whites are among the top-scoring Israeli wines in recent *Wine Spectator* blind tastings.

Sphera is a member of the Judean Hills Quartet, a collaboration with Domaine du Castel, Flam and Tzora formed in 2017 to spotlight this important region. It represents a microcosm of the speed of change in Israel's wine industry.

Rising steeply from the Judean foothills just west of Jerusalem and extending through the mountains in the north, these lush, rolling hills were dedicated to orchards just a few decades ago. In the late 1980s, restaurateur Eli Ben-Zaken was planting fruit and olive trees when he noticed a small parcel on his property that had barely any soil over dolomite rock. "I thought, 'Only vines can survive in this soil,'" he recalls. The inaugural 1992 vintage of Domaine du Castel was an epiphany; he is widely credited with kick-starting Israel's boutique wine revolution. Other vintners soon followed, and the region was transformed from orchards to almost entirely grapevines within two decades.

A Slow, Then Fast, Evolution

Israelis have many strong and often divergent opinions, but they all seem to agree that their wine industry can be described in a series of definable epochs. "We made wine for 5,000 years and it was pretty awful for most of that time," says industry veteran Adam Montefiore, one of the country's most respected wine writers. "Good wine has

Camels and vines share the landscape Darom, in the Negev high desert.



TOP TO BOTTOM: ELAD BRAMI; COURTESY OF DAROM



Sphera, launched by Sima and Doron Rav Hon with the 2012 vintage, stands out for its focus on white wines in a land dominated by reds.

only been made here in the past 20 to 25 years.” When Montefiore moved to Israel in 1989, there were 12 wineries. Today there are 350.

After the Ottoman Empire shut down winemaking in the 7th century, the industry was silent until the 1880s, when Baron Edmond de Rothschild, an early Zionist from the famed Bordeaux banking and wine family, arrived. Fast-forward to the boutique wine movement in the 1990s, which proved that very good wine could be made in Israel. The 2000s were the “golden age,” describes Montefiore, when larger wineries joined the quality revolution (Teperberg, Carmel and Barkan, for example) and new medium-sized players “that focused on quality wine from the beginning—Galil Mountain, Recanati, Dalton,” came on the scene.

The past decade-plus has seen winemakers eschewing varietal wines for blends, a new focus on site-specific, plot-by-plot winemaking and a push to cooler regions. “We are the same latitude as Africa, so we needed to move northward, away from the warm coasts to the higher elevations in Golan Heights, Upper Galilee and east to the Judean Hills—this is where the vast [majority] of the wine industry is located today,” Montefiore says.

The Upper Galilee’s transformation has been dramatic. When Britain-born Alex Haruni established Dalton there, in 1995, it was still a backwater, he recalls. A two-hour drive from Tel Aviv, just a mile from the Lebanese border, the region’s rugged green mountains, waterfalls and highlands are stunningly beautiful—and home to vineyard sites as high as 2,400 feet. Golan Heights Winery (owner of boutique Yarden label) had begun developing high-elevation vineyard sites in the nearby Golan Heights in the 1980s. At the time, no one fully realized how critical elevation would become to quality winemaking in Israel. “As the world gets warmer, what saves us is going higher,” Haruni says.

Haruni was one of the first to believe in the potential of Syrah in Israel; Dalton’s original plantings are over 20 years old. Though he still cultivates Cabernet because demand remains strong, his blends increasingly lean on Rhône varieties, sourced almost entirely from estate vineyards (rare in Israel). Dalton exports to more than 22 countries, and Haruni tries to strike a balance of bending to the needs of the market while staying innovative: He’s experimenting with new vessels—large *foudre*, ceramic, amphora—natural fermentations, and even makes a *pét-nat*.

The Quest to Taste Israel

The search for identity and to characterize a unique Israeli signature drives most of the viticultural progress today. For Recanati, founded in 2000, with vineyards throughout the Galilee, the Jezreel Valley and Judean Hills, a critical turning point was in 2009, says winemaker Kobi Arviv, when the winery first crafted its Carignan Wild Reserve from a rare vineyard of old bush-trained vines. Carignan was once the most widely planted grape here, and vintners today are tapping into these old vines. “Carignan can have great structure and aroma when not overcropped and is great in our climate,” Arviv says. “It’s a grape that allows us to find our identity.”

Arviv began transitioning plantings toward Syrah, Carignan, Marselan and Petit Sirah, a decision not related to the market, he adds, as “most Israelis still want to drink Cabernet and Merlot.” He started fermenting some lots with stems to showcase site character, spice and freshness, and dialed back on oak significantly with the 2016 vintage. “It’s very easy to make jammy, oaky wines here,” he says. “Producing delicate wines in Israel is the challenge.”

When pressed to define the Israeli *terroir* fingerprint, Jeff Morgan, who founded Covenant Israel in 2013, describes “a rich, earthy, meatiness and spicy herbaceousness that I’m a sucker for.”

Morgan launched the Cabernet-focused Covenant Winery in Napa with the late Leslie Rudd in 2003; when he arrived in the Galilee, he was struck by how much it resembled the Rhône Valley. “With limestone-rich, *terra rossa* soils and all the sunshine, this is Mediterranean grape territory,” he says. To “capture the taste of the region,” his Syrah and Viognier wines are made with all-natural fermentations and no filtration.

For some newer producers here, the pursuit of *terroir* expression has greater meaning than simply crafting good wine; it’s about seeking a deeper emotional connection to Israel itself. Long Island native and tech entrepreneur Jacob Ner-David came to the Jezreel Valley after years of living in Jerusalem, and co-founded Jezreel Valley Winery on a kibbutz in 2012. Jezreel was the scene of historic battles in the Hebrew Bible, the center of Jewish mystical life and not far from where the New Testament tells that Jesus turned water into wine.

WHAT DOES KOSHER MEAN?

The wines of Israel are often hamstrung by their conflation with the word “kosher.” First, not all Israeli wines are kosher. Second, many people mistakenly associate kosher with Manischewitz, the sweet wine consumed at Passover and bar mitzvahs. In fact, the kosher certification is more like an organic certification and has nothing to do with quality: The winemaking process must simply be handled by Sabbath-observant Jews and no non-kosher additives may be used.

“It’s important to me that people taste the land of Israel when they drink my wines,” says Ner-David, who crafts mostly blends from Syrah, Carignan and Argaman. “We are blessed with sunshine and some beautiful old Carignan vines; we don’t want to mask that with a lot of oak and we need wines that pair well with our Mediterranean cuisine.”

In the Judean Hills, Shiloh was founded in 2005 with a mission to make “the finest wine possible” as well as represent the journey of the “Jewish story, from their beginnings as a people in Biblical times to the flowering of Israel today,” says winemaker Amichai Luria. It’s located near an important worship site for Israelites some 3,000 years ago, and the town of Shiloh was where the Tabernacle and Ark of the Convent were kept. Now, in a state-of-the-art winery here, Luria crafts modern-style Bordeaux blends.

Although Rhone plantings increase, Cabernet yields many fine wines. “Although the fashion now is to disparage Cabernet, it’s still responsible for some of our top wines, and I love the Cabernet-Syrah blends,” says Katz.

“The Judean Hills *terroir* and cooler climate has a lot to do with the finesse of my wines,” says Ben-Zaken. “It took us a long time to master the work in the vineyard and the art of drip irrigation.” (Yet he too is getting into the Rhône game with his Razi’el brand).

Climate-Control Technology

While Israelis have looked to leading regions around the world for winemaking expertise, viticulturists from around the globe now come to Israel to learn how to cope with climate change. “Some very famous vintners

“I WANT TO TELL THE STORY OF A PLACE, NOT A VARIETY. OUR TERROIR GIVES REDS WITH LOVELY OLIVE TAPENADE AND SPICE.”

Eran Pick, Tzora

have visited us, to see what will happen to their vineyards in 20 years—if not already,” says Montefiore. “Regions where increasingly ripe fruit does not tell the story of their region.”

In the 1940s, Israel pioneered a drip irrigation technology that was adopted globally, and the country continues to spearhead innovation in water conservation with technologies such as hydric stress meters, humidity soil sensors and digital tools to measure how much sun leaves are absorbing. It leads in new techniques to prevent soil evaporation and in trellising and sun shading systems.

Israel’s desalination technology, for instance, made viticulture possible in one of the driest regions in the world: the Negev desert. In these brown hills located between Egypt and Jordan, days can get close to 100° F, and in the winter dip below freezing. Yet a growing number of producers are seeking out Negev, convinced of the benefits of high-desert grapegrowing.

Eran Raz, who founded his boutique Nana winery in Negev in 2007, believes desert vineyards enable him to have maximum control over vine growth and berry size. Precise irrigation is the key to achieving the flavors he aims for; his Nana whites are standouts. Yatir Winery, founded in 2000 on the edge of the Yatir Forest and Negev recently launched a new winery in Negev, called Darom.

The map is still being drawn for Israel’s wine regions. But, says Montefiore, “When you stop and reflect and realize just how much has changed for Israel’s wine industry in the past 30 years, can you imagine what is possible in the next 30?”

Senior editor Kristen Bieler is Wine Spectator’s lead taster on the wines of Israel.

REDISCOVERING LOST GRAPES

Want to taste the wines that King David and Jesus Christ drank? It’s now possible, thanks to a project spearheaded by Recanati Winery, in partnership with Ariel University, which has helped to identify 82 different varieties of grapes in the West Bank that are traced to Biblical times, based on ancient Talmud references and through DNA testing.

“We’re not sure if these will be the future Israeli flagship wines, but it’s so important to understand our past

and to show people what is unique to this land,” says Recanati winemaker Kobi Arviv. Not only does it help establish and reconstruct Israel’s claim to this ancient land, but it reveals what is most suited for our climate, he adds. Most of these indigenous varieties are white.

Cremisan, a small winery near Bethlehem, has been working with these native grapes for years, while Recanati was the first to produce and sell a 100% Marawi: a crisp, mineral-rich white. Master of wine Ido

Lewinsohn, who pioneered the project when he led winemaking at Recanati, is now producing a Marawi at Barkan Segal, and other wineries are working with the white Dabouki and red Bittuni grapes.

Grown by Palestinians on Palestinian territory, the collaboration is significant in what it means for this complicated, politically divisive part of the world. “It’s a Palestinian and Israeli effort, and has been so positive,” says Arviv.



A Byzantine-era winemaking facility was unearthed in Yavne, Israel, in 2021.

RECOMMENDED WINES FROM ISRAEL

Nearly 75 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [WineSpectator.com/IsraelAlpha101522](https://www.winespectator.com/IsraelAlpha101522). WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

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|--|-----------|--------------|---|-----------|-------------|
| TZORA Misty Hills Judean Hills 2020 | 92 | \$90 | SPHERA White Concepts First Page Judean Hills 2021 | 90 | \$54 |
| A decadent yet balanced red, with ample lush black fruit, mocha and toasted spice offset by a mineral core and lip-smacking acidity. Integrated and complete. Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | Medium- to full-bodied, with a zesty spice character to creamed pear, melon and yellow plum. Floral and rich. Chenin Blanc blend.— <i>B.S.</i> | | |
| DOMAINE DU CASTEL Grand Vin Haute-Judée 2019 | 91 | \$90 | TABOR Cabernet Sauvignon Galilee Malkiya 2018 | 90 | \$60 |
| Bold and polished, with cassis and red berry flavors that are silky on a well-defined palate. Stylish and pure, with elegant balance between sweet fruit and toasty elements. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.— <i>J.M.</i> | | | A sleek red, with pure flavors of sappy blackberry and spicy licorice. Takes a savory turn, with smoke, thyme and graphite shavings.— <i>A.N.</i> | | |
| GOLAN HEIGHTS WINERY Cabernet Sauvignon Galilee Yarden 2018 | 91 | \$39 | TZORA Judean Hills White 2021 | 90 | \$38 |
| An elegant, refined red, with silky tannins encasing layers of wild berry, plum and sweet and savory spices. Fresh and balanced, thanks to tangy acidity that carries the medium-long finish.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | A generous style, this well-knit, richly textured white offers lush sweet apple and pear flavors. Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.— <i>B.S.</i> | | |
| NANA Chardonnay Negev 2019 | 91 | \$50 | TZORA Shores Red Judean Hills 2020 | 90 | \$44 |
| A concentrated, distinctive white, with a pronounced salted caramel note weaving throughout. Shows freshly juiced lemon that plays off creamed honey, chamomile, dried thyme and sweet hay.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | Powerful, with ripe blackberry, warm black licorice, singed wild herbs and charred sandalwood gliding through the finish. Syrah blend.— <i>B.S.</i> | | |
| SPHERA White Signature Judean Hills 2021 | 91 | \$68 | YATIR Yatir Creek Judean Hills 2018 | 90 | \$60 |
| A heady, enticing white, with flint, pear, meringue and honeyed peach spilling across the oily palate. Gains lushness and warmth from toast and cream notes. Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | Savory, herbaceous and dark, with smoked meat and charred alder infusing ripe black fruit, graphite and anise. Syrah blend.— <i>B.S.</i> | | |
| COVENANT ISRAEL Syrah Israel 2018 | 90 | \$75 | DOMAINE DU CASTEL Petit Castel Haute-Judée 2020 | 89 | \$50 |
| Ripe cherry compote, red licorice and smoked herbs are supported by mouthwatering acidity in this well-crafted red. Vibrant finish.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | A generous wine introduced by warm red licorice and baked cherry, with refreshing iron shavings and chalky tannins. Merlot blend.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| COVENANT ISRAEL Viognier Israel Blue C 2021 | 90 | \$28 | COVENANT ISRAEL Blue C Israel 2019 | 89 | \$40 |
| A bright, juicy white, with citrus blossom and apricot mingling with flinty mineral notes. Creamy and smooth, with grapefruit acidity.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | Focused and firm, this dark, chewy red reveals layers of violet, generous blueberry compote and anise. Long, dry finish. Syrah blend.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| DALTÔN Galilee Galilo 2018 | 90 | \$65 | DALTÔN Alma Red Galilee 2019 | 89 | \$22 |
| Offers a heady mix of plum, blueberry and blackberry compote, with spice, earth and tobacco. Shows great energy. Shiraz blend.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | A balanced red, with nice density to the sappy cherry and blackberry flavors, backed by a firm frame of chalky tannins. Shiraz blend.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| GALIL MOUNTAIN Meron Galilee 2018 | 90 | \$33 | GALIL MOUNTAIN Alon Galilee 2019 | 89 | \$24 |
| Plush, with plum compote and grilled herbs that firm up on the fresh finish. A modern style, yet balanced and refined. Syrah blend.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | A charming red, with sweet tea and red plum flavors infused with anise, pencil shavings and herbs. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| GOLAN HEIGHTS WINERY Yarden Allone Habashan Syrah Galilee 2018 | 90 | \$75 | GOLAN HEIGHTS WINERY Merlot Galilee Allone Habashan Vineyard 2017 | 89 | \$88 |
| Modern and polished, with an elegance and purity to flavors of red currant and plum, set against cedar, cocoa powder and vanilla.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | A lush red, with plum, cherry and warm licorice flavors set against fresh, snappy acidity and sinewy tannins on a sleek palate.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| GOLAN HEIGHTS WINERY Yarden Allone Habashan Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Galilee 2018 | 90 | \$155 | JEZREEL Adumim Galilee 2018 | 89 | \$35 |
| Voluptuous, with red and black fruit and violet wrapped in oak spice, mocha, toasted cedar and tobacco. Tangy acidity adds vibrancy.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | Plush and inviting, with cherry and brambly berry notes laced with dried flowers, chalky minerality and savory details. Syrah blend.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| NANA Chenin Blanc Negev 2019 | 90 | \$30 | NANA Negev Tethys 2020 | 89 | \$50 |
| A creamy, full-bodied white, with flavors of honeyed apple compote, peach compote and custard. Maintains tension and energy.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | This perfumed red offers dense black and blue fruit, staying light on its feet with bright acidity. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| RECANATI Special Reserve Galilee 2018 | 90 | \$60 | RECANATI Carignan Judean Hills Wild Reserve 2019 | 89 | \$49 |
| Elegant and balanced, with sweet vanilla, tobacco and cracked pepper infusing a base of red cassis and plum. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.— <i>J.M.</i> | | | A vibrant, lively take on Carignan, with juicy pomegranate flavors set against a backdrop of mesquite, white pepper and sweet spices.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| SHILOH Amichai Solomon Judean Hills 2020 | 90 | \$40 | RECANATI Marawi Judean Hills 2020 | 89 | \$35 |
| Red currant and black licorice meld with violet, wet earth, eucalyptus, herbs and chocolate in this chewy red. Syrah and Petit Verdot.— <i>A.N.</i> | | | Savory, with wet stone, spiced apple and lemon on a light- to medium-bodied frame, showing smoked pineapple, honey and toast.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| SPHERA Sauvignon Blanc Judean Hills White Concepts 2021 | 90 | \$57 | SHILOH Petite Syrah Judean Hills Secret Reserve 2019 | 89 | \$50 |
| A focused, uniquely structured white, with a firm mineral backbone filled out with honeydew, kumquat, pear and fresh-cut parsley.— <i>B.S.</i> | | | Dark and dense, with sweet blackberry liqueur woven with smoked herbs and charred alder. Reveals violet, cardamom and cumin.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| | | | TZORA Shores White Judean Hills 2021 | 89 | \$44 |
| | | | Shows salty citrus flavors, with honey and tropical notes. Starts off round, then firms up. Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |
| | | | YATIR Mt. Amasa White Judean Hills 2020 | 89 | \$45 |
| | | | Jasmine and honeysuckle lead off in this bright, balanced white, with melon and green herbs rounding out the palate. Viognier blend.— <i>K.B.</i> | | |