

KOSHER WINE GUIDE 2017

Covenant Israel

Jeff Morgan and Leslie Rudd, the kosher Californian ‘cult’ winemakers, head east with good results.

BY GAMLIEL KRONEMER | March 17, 2017, 9:44 am |

Covenant Wines, a 15-year-old partnership between Jeff Morgan and Leslie Rudd, is in many ways a unique kosher wine success story. In 2002, when the partners started laying the groundwork for producing their “cult”-style kosher Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, many in the wine world saw it as a folly to try to build a business around creating wines for such a small niche as the super-premium kosher wine market. Rudd himself was too nervous even to use grapes from his award-winning Rudd Estates vineyards, and instead imported fruit from the nearby Larkmead Vineyard.

Yet the gamble clearly has paid off, and today Covenant Wines has a new-state-of-the-art winery in Berkeley, Calif., and a portfolio with more than 20 different wines, including four from its new branch: Covenant Israel.

Twelve years ago, when I first interviewed Jeff Morgan, the Wine Spectator journalist-turned-kosher winemaker, shortly after the release of the first vintage of Covenant Cabernet Sauvignon, he told me that Covenant had been born three years before (in 2002) at a meeting of the Napa Valley Jewish community at Leslie Rudd’s Oakville Estate. It was there that winemaker Rudd asked Morgan (who had been the Spectator’s in-house expert on kosher wines), “Why aren’t kosher wines better than they are?” Morgan says he decided then and there to make a great kosher wine from “the greatest wine region, Napa Valley,” because “Jews are thirsty for great wine.”

Morgan says that it was a similar epiphany five years ago, albeit in a less idyllic setting, which led to Covenant’s new Israeli wines: “I was brushing my teeth and two words just popped into my head, ‘Covenant Israel.’ I called Leslie and asked him, ‘Covenant Israel, what do you think?’ He said, ‘Absolutely, let’s do this.’”

Morgan and Rudd had recently returned from a trip to Israel. “We were there simply for a look around; neither of us had been back there for many years,” says Morgan. In touring wine country in the Galilee and the Golan Heights, they found that “it reminded us a lot of California ... the Galilee has red soil with a lot of limestone, and it was like I was in parts of Napa or Sonoma; only I was in Israel.”

At that point it took Morgan about a year and a half to find the facility and personnel to make wine in Israel; he found them at the Jezreel Valley Winery, where he produces Covenant Israel, and with Ari Erle, an American-Israeli émigré winemaker who at one time had worked in Napa Valley, and, says Morgan, “really understands how I make wine.”

“We started with three barrels of a Syrah/Cabernet Franc blend in 2013, then we went up to seven barrels in 2014 ... and last year we did about 50 barrels [2,000 cases],” says Morgan. “I’m making mostly Syrah, because I believe that Syrah is to Israel what Cabernet Sauvignon is to Napa. ... It does the best of all the red varietals in Israel.”

As with its Californian wines, Covenant’s Israeli wines are terroir-driven. “We don’t add yeasts to any of our wine, in California or Israel ... and we don’t do much but let the wines ferment,” says Morgan. “I think it is a pretty natural expression of the vineyards’ terroir.”

Currently, Morgan commutes to Israel five or six times each year to oversee production. However, running wine production on two different continents has meant that Morgan has had to step back from the day-to-day winemaking operations. “Ari in Israel, along with Jonathan Hajdu in California, are now the official Covenant winemakers, and they both make wine according to the protocols I developed over the years at Covenant,” says Morgan. “But in today’s high-tech world I actually have real-time records ... on the cloud, which track fermentation. So I can go online and see what is happening in each of our tanks and all of our barrels, which is something that I could not do four or five years ago.”

Morgan’s advice when trying Covenant Israel for the first time “is not to compare it to Covenant California. I think the idea is to view it as what Israel has delivered to me and my crew.” Indeed, for Morgan, “Covenant Israel is really about connecting to our people, our heritage, our land, through the medium that I know, which is wine.”

Covenant Israel, Syrah, Golan Heights, 2014:

Full bodied and garnet colored, this luscious full bodied was made with a cuvée of 90 percent Syrah and 10 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, all grown in the Tel Faris vineyard. Expect a rich nose of cherries, blackberries, and cassis, with whiffs of herbs and smoke. The flavor is complex with cherries and cassis at the front of the pallet, notes of raspberry and plum mid pallet, a lovely touch of smoke on the finish. Look for hints of fennel and espresso, and spicy notes of black pepper and allspice. Well structured, with an abundance of rich silky tannin, this wine is ready to drink now and for the next seven years. **Score A/A-**. (\$64.95. Available at Skyview Wine and Liquors, 5681 Riverdale Ave., Riverdale, [718] 601-8222)

Covenant Israel, Blue C, Viognier, Galilee, 2016:

Made from 100 percent Viognier grapes grown in the Manara vineyard — the grapes were whole-cluster pressed and then fermented in old French oak barrels — this light-bodied, straw-colored wine has flavors and aromas of peaches, pears, lychees, and Meyer lemons, with a lovely hint of cream. Crisp and well structured, this wine should drink well until the end of the decade. **Score B+** (Approximately \$35, to be released in late spring.)

Covenant Israel, Blue C, Rosé, Golan Heights, 2016:

Made from 100 percent free-run Syrah juice that was bled off from the winery’s flagship wine before it had long contact with the grape skins, this peach-colored wine has a floral nose with notes of strawberries, cherries and fresh grapes. Look for flavor of strawberries, citrus, raspberries and cherries. Restrained, yet crisp and refreshing, with yet a hint of residual sugar. Drink within a year of release. **Score B+** (Approximately \$35, to be released in late spring.)

Wines are scored on an 'A'-'F' scale where 'A' is excellent, 'B' is good, 'C' is flawed, 'D' is very flawed, and 'F' is undrinkable. Prices listed reflect the price at the retailer mentioned.

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