

Historic Israeli Family *Launches*

by David Rhodes

As you go about your daily life in Israel, reading the street signs can be your prompter towards a lesson in Israeli history. Almost every street is named after an Israeli or Jewish historical figure or event that someone has written at least one book on. Whether its Ben Gurion, Jabotinski, Wieszman, Herzl, Moshe Dayan, Brandeis, Bialek or Rambam these names resonate with most of us and could warrant their own museum never mind a thoroughfare. For those who know the history of wine in Israel in the modern era, other than the contributions of the Rothschild family, perhaps no other name related to wine is as ubiquitous as

Montefiore.

British **Moses Montefiore**, born in Tuscany, Italy, was one of the most prominent Jewish philanthropists of the 19th century. There are testimonials to his generosity all over the world with hospitals, schools and other institutions bearing his name. One of his favorite most passionate interests was sponsoring Jews living in then Ottoman controlled **Jerusalem**. He would be the first and principal benefactor

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of agriculture for Jews to work outside the Old City (when there was little or no one at the time adventurous enough to work outside the safety of its walls). Moses would build a windmill that still bears his name as well as encourage residents of Jerusalem to plant vines for wine and olive trees for their fruit and pressing oil, both staples of a Mediterranean diet and relatively profitable agricultural endeavors at a time when the industrial revolution was limited to only a few countries

worldwide. Montefiore was said to drink a bottle of wine a day and lived to be over 100 years old. His fondness for Jerusalem had the city's name in Hebrew engraved, embroidered and inscribed next to his family crest on his linens, his silverware, his stationary among many other of his wide array of possessions.

As a further demonstration of the Montefiore's family connection to Jerusalem, Adam's brother, **Simon Sebag Montefiore**, would write **Jerusalem: The Biography**, considered by many to be the most objective and authoritative account of the Holy City's long and dramatic story throughout the last few millennia leading up to today.

Even though Montefiore never moved to Israel, his name is still present throughout with many streets and neighborhoods bearing his name. He would have no children of his own but his nephew and heir, **Joseph Sebag Montefiore**, would and eventually sire a branch from which his descendants four generations later would make Aliyah to Israel in 1989. Adam Montefiore would move with his wife Jill and their three children (Liam, David and Rachel) from the United Kingdom and settle in Anglo friendly Ra'anana just a short ride northeast of Tel Aviv. Adam had been quite established in the wine trade in the UK before moving to Israel. This experience was well suited for him becoming an export marketing manager for the Golan Heights Winery for his first decade in Israel followed by the last decade as he worked for the Carmel Winery.

Two of his three children, **Rachel and David** would also enter the industry and would join with

native Israeli **Arnon Geva** to establish the Montefiore Winery that launched earlier this year. Rachel has worked in wine shops, been a sommelier in restaurants and worked for Bravdo Winery, after her studies at Israel's Ramat Gan Wine Academy where classes are taught in Hebrew. David studied wine at the WSET in London, also been a sommelier in restaurants and worked a harvest in both Australia and Spain. Rachel now works as Sales & Marketing Manager, while David, not involved day to day affairs with the **Montefiore Winery**, is Wine Culture Manager for Tabor Winery which has him interacting with wine shops, restaurants and hotels on behalf of Israel's sixth largest winery.

Arnon too has some fairly well heeled credentials in the Israeli wine industry. Arnon had been selling life insurance in Israel, which he says prepares you to sell anything to anybody, when he married the daughter of a restaurant owner in Jerusalem. He visited that restaurant, Mamma Mia, frequently for it was the first restaurant in Israel to serve fresh made pasta and that's when he met his then wife. That restaurant owned by Eli Ben Zaken would make their own wine, at first two barrels, and eventually after rave reviews for the wine and the challenges of the restaurant business focus on wine and wine alone. Arnon as part of the family became one of the founders of the Castel Winery, the first Israeli boutique to gain international recognition when the wine was brought by a fan of the winery to the famous Sotheby auction house in the London where it was accepted with applause. Arnon would leave the Castel Winery after thirteen

years to move on to working for larger commercial Israeli wineries before being beckoned to return to Arnon's boutique roots to start his own boutique winery linked to where he was born in Jerusalem within sight of the **Montefiore Windmill**. Teaming up with the Montefiore family seemed an organic pairing. After finding foreign investors to bolster their coffers and expand their options, they (Arnon with Rachel and David Montefiore) founded a hosting winery facility (the Mony Winery) and a consulting winemaker (Sam Soroka) that fit their current needs until such time they find their own facility which they hope and plan to be as close to Jerusalem as possible. Because of the prohibitive cost of real estate in Jerusalem these days, they won't likely settle within the city limits but more likely at a nearby moshav or kibbutz and they expect to do so within the next three years. In the meantime, they have plans to open a tasting room in Jerusalem **Mishkenot Sha'ananim** in the immediate future.

Recently, I visited their Tel Aviv offices which is until they have a physical location of their own is a natural fit. Rachel lives in Tel Aviv and much of their restaurant sales are to premium restaurants in the "White City". Here's a tagline "Historic goodness of Jerusalem's vineyards to be enjoyed in the playground that is Tel Aviv." Rachel was plugging away at her computer contacting clients in Israel and promoting the winery through social media and Arnon was working on expanding their reach to international contacts. I would first taste their **2012 Montefiore White (K)** NIS 60 a blend of 70% Colombard and 30% Chardonnay. Its an



Rachel Montefiore & Arnon Geva of Montefiore Winery with Moti Schwartz & Uri Dromi of Mishkenot Sha'ananim. Photo: Incites 2013

unusual blend but one that shows the influence of their consulting winemaker since Sam was the first to launch Colombard in recent memory as a single varietal wine in Israel (at Mony) and it has been well received by many. Often Colombard plays a supporting role to other white wines lending its crisp acidity to white blends or even single varietal whites where 85% or more of another grape such as Chardonnay gets its name on the front label and Colombard is only given credit on the back label. In this case, the 70/30 split in Colombard's favor gains it the lead over Chardonnay but it doesn't reach the 85% threshold to have the front label by its lonesome.

Green apple and array of citric notes such as lemon custard, mandarin orange as well as ripe pineapple are enhanced by a pleasantly lingering crisp acidity with cool mineral undertones that this 13% alcohol wine with a medium body wine entails. On

the nose, its easy to mistake for a full bodied Chardonnay yet in the glass, the Colombard shines brightest. In the moment of tasting something special, I gave it **92 points** and might have scored even higher if I had it with an ideal food pairing such as ceviche with the aforementioned fruit or perhaps an Asian Chicken Salad with mandarin oranges. I can see myself drinking this wine someday on a sail boat someday off some Greek island, maybe Rhodes, with some caviar or even foie gras. Either way, the Montefiore White was a delightful respite coming out of the heat of a sweltering afternoon in Tel Aviv in what had been otherwise a fairly temperate summer (I optimistically hope it shows in the wines of 2013).

Leaving their offices, later that same evening, I would taste two of their reds (as well as start with their white) with some friends over dinner. The white was quite popular with everyone, even those not

traditionally fans of white wines. The reds would be a little more challenging. I had heeded words from the winery that the wines seemed quite popular with wine insiders which initially had me wondering what the context of those comments meant.

The first red we would try would be the **2012 Montefiore Red (K)** NIS 77. It's an unoaked red blend of Malbec (34%) Shiraz (33%) Petite Sirah (33%) and in the Australian style all three varietals appear on the front label. Black raspberry, blackberries, a tinge of blueberries with some black walnut accents (maybe from the untamed tannins) came through. It's a challenging wine for first do you serve it chilled like an unoaked Beaujolais Nouveau or at room temperature. I would try it both ways as well as right from the bottle and decanted and I think consumers and sommeliers might find reasons to serve it differently depending on the wishes of the diner as well as what food its paired with. These are three powerhouse grapes in this wine so the fruit is like a purple punch to the face and such a young red (not made through carbonic maceration) doesn't hide its tannins so I think a fatty juicy burger, a black pepper spiced beef or lamb stew or BBQ chicken wings as nice matches. The tannins are quite tamed when served chilled but if you're having grilled meats maybe you want the tannins to play off the fat or charcoal flavor of whatever meat is served. With 14% alcohol it seemingly has more natural acidity than some Israeli reds which also makes it fairly food friendly but I would love in the future if they were to continue this wine to make some oaked versions as well because I couldn't help myself from feeling this wine with

oak accents might be amazing. Even with reservations that many consumers might not know how to serve this in a way they like I still give the wine 88 points because some wines aren't meant for everyone but there are those who will find this wine a fun project to serve in certain situations.

The second red I would try with my friends would be the **2010 Montefiore Petite Sirah (K)** NIS 145. As with all their wines, the grapes are sources from the Judean Hills leading up to Jerusalem typically from predominantly lined limestone vineyards. Aged in French oak barrels for 14 months, this wine sports a modest 13% alcohol. Once more, Petite Sirah is not a grape for everyone. Just like Old Vine Caringan or Zinfandel some feel these wines can be fruit monsters and not as refined as some more "noble" grapes as Cab, Syrah, Merlot or Pinot Noir. It would be hard to confuse this wine for any of those four (except maybe the Syrah made in the Australian Shiraz style). Dense blackberries (so dense you

feel like you might be picking them later off your teeth) with a creamy body, notes of cedar and tobacco leaves makes for a wine that screams for grilled meats, or possibly duck with cherries. Petite Sirah is a big hit in California where its mostly produced but as a single varietal it is becoming more popular in Israel too and if you love Petite Sirah's boldness you won't be intimidated by this wine but if you like nuanced Bordeaux blends or Burgundies this wine might not be for you. As someone who likes Petite Sirah, I give it **91 points** though next time I hope to taste it with more decanting but my friends left little for that undertaking. Another year or two of aging would seem to do this wine better as well and releasing a wine a year or two early is a too common complaint of mine of fledgling wineries though I understand the economic necessity of moving one vintage to pay for the next. I hope they retain a decent wine library so they (and potential buyers as well as writers) can taste their wines as they mature.

They were unfortunately (for me not them) sold out of their **2010 Montefiore Syrah (K)** NIS 135 **91 points** which is also aged 14 months in oak (mostly French with some American) and its no surprise since Syrah is rapidly becoming the favorite red Israeli grape for many wine insiders (just as Rhone wines are big with wine insiders in the United States) although Cabernet and Merlot still hold the attention of more consumers. In addition to this wine which I'll have to seek out on my own they have a single varietal Cabernet and a Cab, Syrah and Petit Verdot blend, **2011 Montefiore Kerem Moshe (K)** NIS 270, coming out later this year as their premium level reds. I'll anxiously await tasting Montefiore's new reds as well as tasting those I just rated to see how their aging since they are so young they should only get better for some time to come. Even though the Montefiore name is so ingrained to Israel's past it seems like it might become linked, for many, in what to look forward to when one thinks of Israeli wines.



Built in 1857, the Montefiore Windmill is a reminder of the family's ties to Jerusalem.

