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## Intriguing Israeli Wines

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Yarden Blanc de Blancs 2008 is a stunner, a vintage sparkling wine that is elegant and complex.

*Patricia Decker*

Prime examples of Israel's wine "renaissance", these **Israeli wines** are the product of Old World tradition and New World technology. Over 20 years ago, Israeli winemakers returned from classic wine regions abroad, armed with newfound knowledge and technology, ready to experiment and evolve their wine industry. Today, almost 300 wineries, mostly smaller boutique operations, produce a dazzling array of quality wines. Most Israeli wines are **kosher**, but aren't the sweet Manischewitz wines that many associate with the label. Exports are growing, with 25% leaving the country, of kosher and non-kosher wines. Israeli wines are getting lots of attention, and deservedly so.

Although most of Israel is too hot and dry to grow high quality wine grapes, there are cool climate areas where they can thrive. The **Golan Heights** is one such region, situated in the northeast corner of Israel, a high elevation plateau, with diverse soils over a volcanic base. It has the coolest climate in Israel, and altitudes range from Mount Hermon, at 3900 feet, to the Sea of Galilee. International grape varietals are planted here today, since Israel's ancient vineyards weren't kept up, with a heavy emphasis on Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Chardonnay.

**Golan Heights Winery** selectively cultivates 1500 acres of vineyards in this region, 28 vineyards separated by block, over 400 of them harvested and vinified individually. Head Winemaker Victor Schoenfeld then assembles the final blend, having a large number of single block wines to choose from. Schoenfeld, considered one of the most important winemakers in Israel, is responsible for crafting four premium brands, Yarden (the flagship), Golan Heights, Gilgal, and Mount Hermon. These wines range from sparkling wines to full-bodied reds, and reflect the care of precise viticulture and attention to detail of modern technology, yielding some of the best wines that Israel has to offer.

The **Yarden Blanc de Blancs 2008** is stunningly beautiful, an elegant 100% Chardonnay sparkler, with tiny persistent bubbles. Crisp and complex, with aromas of green apples, lemon zest, white flowers, and toasty bread, it has a creamy texture, and finishes very long. Extremely high quality, it drinks well now and can age for a couple more years. Excellent as an aperitif or with food, it pairs well with cheese soufflé, fish, and chicken dishes, and retails for \$32.

The **Yarden Chardonnay Odem Organic Vineyard 2014** is round and full-bodied, with ripe pear and stone fruit, a creamy texture framed by toasty oak. Made from organic grapes grown in the highest vineyard in Israel, the wine was aged on its lees in French oak barrels for seven months. Reminiscent of a California Chardonnay in its oak and ripe fruit, this wine goes well with fish and chicken dishes, and retails for \$22.

**Galil Mountain Winery**, located in the Upper Galilee mountains, is a joint venture of Golan Heights Winery and Kibbutz Yiron. Diverse soils at higher elevations make these six vineyards the cradle for high quality fruit, considered one of the best winegrowing areas in Israel, with over 2000 years of winemaking tradition. Winemaker Micha Vaadia is committed to sustainable farming practices, “viticulture and winemaking in harmony with nature”, and with minimal handling of the fruit, pristine wines are made that reflect this distinctive terroir. Seventeen white, rosé, and red wines are produced, mostly all from Bordeaux and Rhône grape varietals.

The **Galil Mountain Rosé 2014** is refreshing with crisp acidity, and fragrant with berry fruit, citrus, and fresh herbs. This blend of 74% Sangiovese, 23% Pinot Noir, and 3% Grenache is lightly structured, with a mineral tang on the long finish. Made from two rosé winemaking techniques, “saignée” for the Pinot Noir and Grenache, and a cold soak/fermentation for the Sangiovese, this is a vibrant wine, with lots of character. Easy drinking, this rosé can compete with many Provence wines, refreshing on its own or good with most foods, it retails for a mere \$12.

In this slice of the Fertile Crescent, ancient lands gives rise to sleek modern wines. Innovation and passion is rapidly transforming Israeli wine into a world-class endeavor, one which beckons us to pour a glass.



Patricia Decker

