

Battlefield Becomes an Israeli Vineyard

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

IMEROM GOLAN, Golan Heights ISRAEL'S newest wine is a unique blend. The formula is something like this: Israeli grapes, grown on former Syrian territory by Israeli kibbutzniks, turned into wine by a California vintner with the help of Orthodox Yemeni Jews working with Italian equipment and French barrels.

Bordeaux it is not. Indeed, it is amazing that the stuff is drinkable. But not only is it drinkable, some wine critics are also hailing Yarden sauvignon blanc 1983 as one of the few top-quality Israeli kosher wines ever to hit the market. For years such kosher Israeli wines as were exported to Europe or America were bought largely either as novelty items or for ceremonial use. Wine experts viewed them as generally syrupy, sweet and lackluster products that could rarely compete on the world market.

Yarden seems to be getting a wholly different reception. Its producers say there is now more demand for the wine from California and New York wine stores than the suppliers can fill.

Yarden's brief history is as interesting as its taste. The wine is produced on the Golan Heights by a consortium of four kibbutzim and four moshavim, which are semiprivate collectives. The project is managed by an irrepensible former apple grower, Shimshon Welner, and a young graduate of the wine program at the University of California at Davis, 24-year-old Andrew Starr.

Many of the vineyards are in and around the Golan's Valley of Tears, within view of the Syrian border and on the site of a tank battle in the 1973 war. More than 250 tank carcasses had to be cleared before the grapes could be planted. "It's a great place," Mr. Welner says of the 230-acre vineyard. "Much better for growing wine than tanks."

The idea of growing wine grapes on the Golan Heights, which has effectively been annexed since Israel captured it in the 1967 war, began in 1972 when Cornelius Ough, a wine expert from the University of California at Davis, visited Mr. Welner's apple groves on the plateau and said the area would be ideal for grapes.

The Golan Heights vineyards range from 800 to 1,800 feet above sea level. This, coupled with the volcanic soil, warm-but-not-hot summers, narrow temperature range, plentiful sun and rainfall without heavy summer downpours, which are the big enemies of wine grapes, led Mr. Ough to believe that the area was a much better place for growing grapes than the hot, dry coastal plains where most of Israel's grapes have been produced since



The New York Times/Micha Bar-Am

Shimshon Welner, left, and Andrew Starr sampling Yarden sauvignon blanc 1983.

biblical days.

The kibbutzim decided to take the advice and began experimenting with vineyards. As more and more kibbutzim on the Golan planted successful vines, they started talking in 1981 about producing wine. Mr. Welner, who at the time barely knew the difference between Château Lafite and grape juice, was tapped to head the project because of his touch with raising apples. Grapes, apples, they all thought, what's the difference?

"We knew from experts who came here that our grapes were better than those being grown elsewhere," said Mr. Welner, now general manager of Ramat Hagolan Vineyards Inc., the consortium representing the kibbutzim, "but when we brought them to sell to one of the big Israeli wine producers they refused to pay a premium price for them. So we said: 'Fine. We'll make our own wine.' It was not enough to have experts say our grapes are good. We had to make our own wine to prove it."

In 1982 Mr. Welner brought his grapes to a little known Israeli vintner to have them made into wine. The result, he says, was something better suited for a carburetor.

"We brought this first wine around and gave it to people here," Mr. Welner said, "and they said, 'Oh, it's very good.' Then we brought it to the United States and people there laughed at it. They would sip it and say: 'It's not wine. It's some liquid, but we don't know if it is wine or not.'"

Reflecting on those first bottles,

Mr. Welner said: "It was more than a failure. It was a crime what we did to those grapes."

Mr. Welner then hired a professional California wine consultant, Peter Stern. The collectives invested \$100,000 and were later backed by a \$1 million Government grant. They hired a Fresno-trained winemaker, Philip Steinschreiber, bought wine-making equipment in Italy and pressed 50 tons of grapes into 3,000 cases of a 1983 vintage sauvignon blanc called Yarden.

Mr. Welner took 120 bottles to California, and he says it fared extremely well. "Everyone tasted it and said: 'This is good. It could never be from Israel,'" he recalled.

One review praised the white wine for its "clean fruit character with solid sauvignon blanc aromas that are uncharacteristic for Israel and reminiscent of better European and California bottles."

Yarden is widely available in the New York metropolitan area for about \$8.75 a bottle. Mr. Welner intends to concentrate exclusively on the American and European markets for the hard currency. The only place Yarden is sold in Israel is at the King David Hotel, where it gets exposure to wealthy tourists.

Mr. Starr is now expanding production of the winery to include other types of reds and whites and has produced a smooth dessert wine called Gamla.

Mr. Stern recruited Mr. Starr by asking him two questions: "Are you interested in living in Israel and are

you Jewish?" For a wine to be certified kosher by the rabbis it has to be made by observant Jews who keep the Sabbath. Only kosher wines are made in Israel.

"I am Jewish, but I was not interested in working in Israel," Mr. Starr said. "My whole idea of Israeli wine was not high quality, and I didn't think you could make it seriously. At first I thought they were nuts, but then when I saw the quality operation they had and the fact that they were producing the best wine in Israel, I thought it might be worth trying."

Yarden is kosher. But because of the stigma of kosher wines, the kosher symbol is tiny on the stylish label, which shows an ancient oil lamp made of a colored mosaic.

Mr. Starr, who works on a private contract, lives on a kibbutz and supervises Orthodox Yemeni Jews who make the wines. Because he is not religious, Mr. Starr is forbidden to even touch the wine. All he can do is give orders. He does not speak Hebrew, so he must often communicate with his workers by hand signals, which can be complicated when he is trying to explain how to operate a wine filter.

He may be the only wine maker who does not have the keys to his own winery. "I am not even allowed to hold the hose when we transfer wine," he said. "When I want to take a sample, I have to have a religious Jew do it."