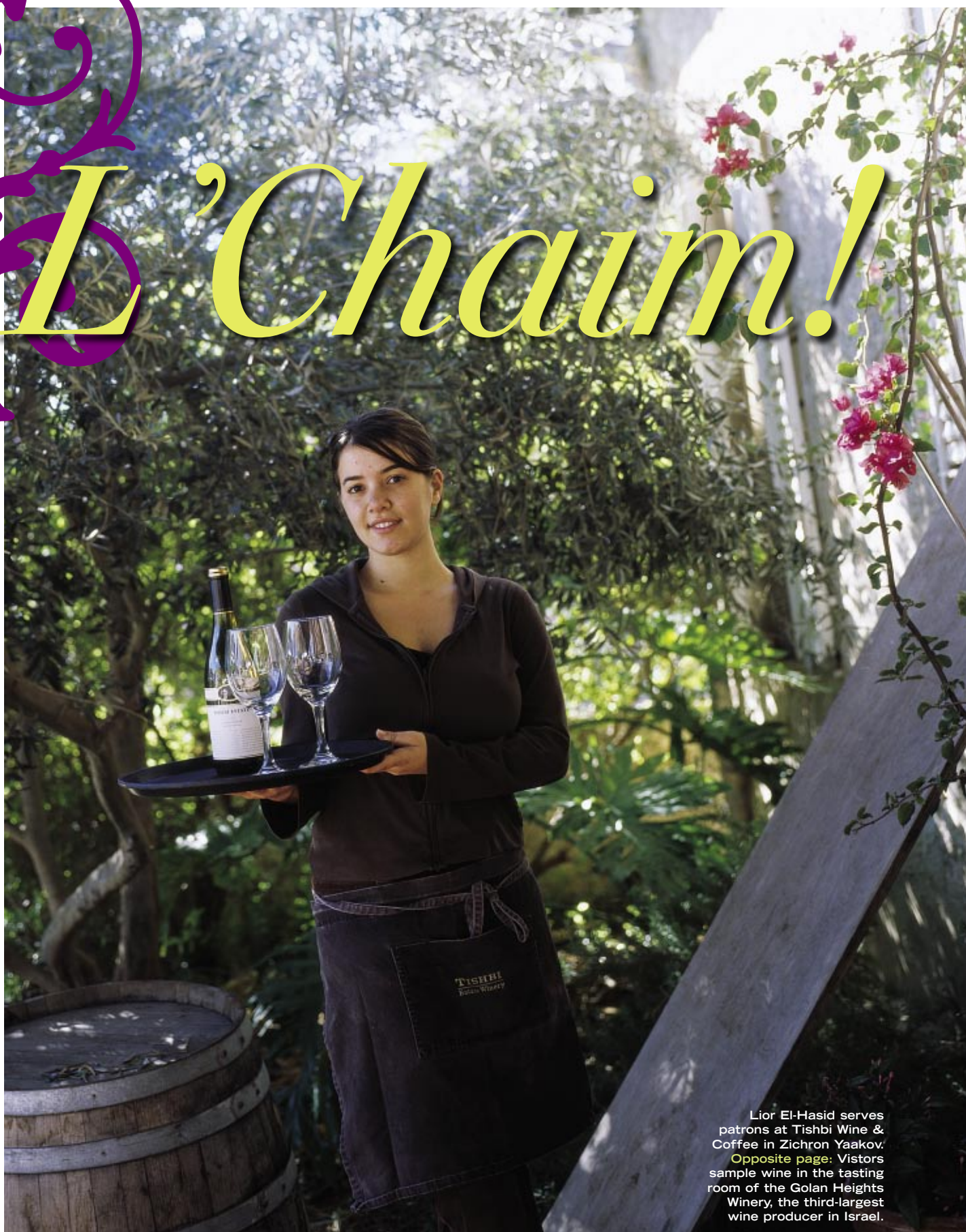




L'Chain!



Lior El-Hasid serves patrons at Tishbi Wine & Coffee in Zichron Yaakov. **Opposite page:** Vistors sample wine in the tasting room of the Golan Heights Winery, the third-largest wine producer in Israel.

By Todd Pitock

Photographs by Kevin Miyazaki



[Celebrating Tel Aviv's ancient roots over a glass or two of Israel's finest]



When I spot the name Tishbi on a stone building on the edge of the main strip of Zichron Yaakov, a mountaintop village about an hour north of Tel Aviv, I step inside.

"I'd like to taste some wine," I tell the woman who greets me by the door.

"Of course," she says. "Please. What do you like?"

"I like what's good," I tell her. And then I add, "My friend Rogov suggested that I come by."

I've known Daniel Rogov for almost a decade, and we have plans to meet in a few days in Tel Aviv. But I drop his name because it carries weight. Daniel Rogov is Israel's leading wine critic, and the growing ranks of the country's wine enthusiasts know him as "Rogov" the way their American counterparts know Robert Parker as "Parker." He has a column in the Israeli edition of the *International Herald Tribune* and in 2004 brought out the first edition of *Rogov's Guide to Israeli Wines*, an annual publication whose latest edition rates 140 wineries and almost 1,200 wines. When his name is involved, Israel's wine connoisseurs hop into their cellars for their best stuff.

So I settle in, buoyed by anticipation of floating for a while on the halcyon drift of my palate. Tishbi's Wine & Coffee, at the top of a cobblestone pedestrian lane of art galleries, tree-shaded al fresco cafés, and trendy-hippy boutiques, is part wine bar

and part espresso bar. All the outdoor tables are occupied, crowded with food, wine glasses, demitasses, and, of course, patrons with cell phones, a scene that's recognizably Israeli but could be Napa. To the west are the coastal plains and the rim of the Mediterranean Sea. To the east are the mountains of Samaria and the Galilee.

The hostess who pours, it turns out, is Oshra Tishbi, the charming 33-year-old great-granddaughter of Michael Chamiletzki, who came to Ottoman-ruled Palestine in 1882 at the request of the French wine magnate Baron Edmund de Rothschild. The Baron supported the early immigrants who had hoped to make a living selling sacramental wine from the Holy Land. Rothschild's impact was profound. Today his company is Israel's largest winery — though the story of Israeli wine is arguably in smaller ventures such as Tishbi Estate Winery, which Oshra Tishbi's father, Yonathan, started in 1984.

Oshra travels worldwide to meet with chefs and sommeliers. In New York, Tishbi wines now appear in a number of prestigious spots, including Danny Meyer's Indian-inspired Tabla and the Panorama Café, an Italian-American restaurant. Oshra pours a full range of wines. Each time I express enthusiasm for a particular style, she says, "If you like that, I want you to try this one. It's very special." We go through a series of whites and reds — the royal vinifera range of chardonnays, cabernet sauvignons, merlots, and sauvignon blancs.



[The official symbol of Israeli tourism is a bunch of grapes.]

If I were home, a nap would cap off a perfect summer's afternoon of wine tasting. But I've only just embarked upon the itinerary I have planned. I've got some more wine tasting to do, and together with Rogov, who is with me in spirit and in book form, we have miles to go before we rest.

The History

I am an enthusiastic wine traveler. Apart from savoring the complex pleasures of the grape, the pursuit of the fruits of the vine takes a traveler off the beaten path. Moreover, for all of the effete, *Sideways* talk that it can invite — in satire if not in reality — wine is fundamentally about the land and the people who live in it, which, when you think about it, is the essence of travel.

To some degree, you could say that most happy wine stories are alike. They begin with a visionary who is thwarted by bad luck or a lack of some practical skills; eventually some

wine messiah arrives with knowledge and/or money; technology is upgraded, the mystery of the earlier failure is solved, and voila — *salud*, cheers, *l'chaim* — success is proclaimed.

Israel's story, though, is hardly so garden variety. Wine's roots here extend back to ancient times, and they laid the foundation for the Zionist enterprise. (In fact, the official symbol of Israeli tourism is a bunch of grapes.) The Biblical book of Genesis reports that Noah planted the first vineyard. Exodus details how Moses' spies in Canaan brought back immense clusters of grapes. Deuteronomy lists wine among the blessings the promised land will yield and specifies libations and tithing of wine, while King David's wine-growing endeavor was so vast that he split the responsibility of managing the vineyards and storing his wines between two separate officials. The prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel describe steps for growing and caring for wine; Ezekiel notes that it's better to grow vines upward on trellises than along the ground. And the



A glass of 2004 Special Reserve Chardonnay at the Tishbi Winery. **Opposite page:** a photograph of ancestors Michael and Malca Tishbi adorns the Tishbi label.

[Wine is fundamentally about the land
and the people who live in it.]



archeological evidence of amphorae, wine presses, and other paraphernalia is scattered throughout the region — all the way to Egypt, where clay jugs indicate that pharaohs imported wine from Canaan. The Hebrew language itself provides linguistic evidence of winemakers' awareness of *terroir*, with 29 words that differentiate types of soil.

Wine production stopped in Israel during periods of Muslim rule because of Islam's prohibition on alcohol, but because wine was a feature of Jewish, and later Christian, rituals and sacraments, the first immigrants from Europe revived the industry, beginning in Jerusalem in 1848. They approached Rothschild, of the famed Chateau Lafite in Bordeaux, to finance their venture — holy wine from the Holy Land, as it were. Rothschild sent experts, supplies, and varieties of vine stock from Europe and funded wineries in Rishon Letzion, just south of what is now Tel Aviv, in 1882, and in Zichron Yaakov in 1890. Things didn't start off well; heat killed the first harvests; next came a plague of insects. Nevertheless, in 1906 Rothschild organized a collective to manage the two wineries called Carmel Mizrahi, an entity that dominated the Israeli wine industry through the 1980s and still exists today.

The quality of Israeli wine has increased significantly over the last two decades, especially with the proliferation of

boutique and artisanal producers. Some release fewer than 1,000 bottles a year, some more than 100,000. The challenge for small wineries in Israel, as in all countries, is distribution, and various efforts are under way to organize boutique producers and help them reach a wider market.

Other Parts

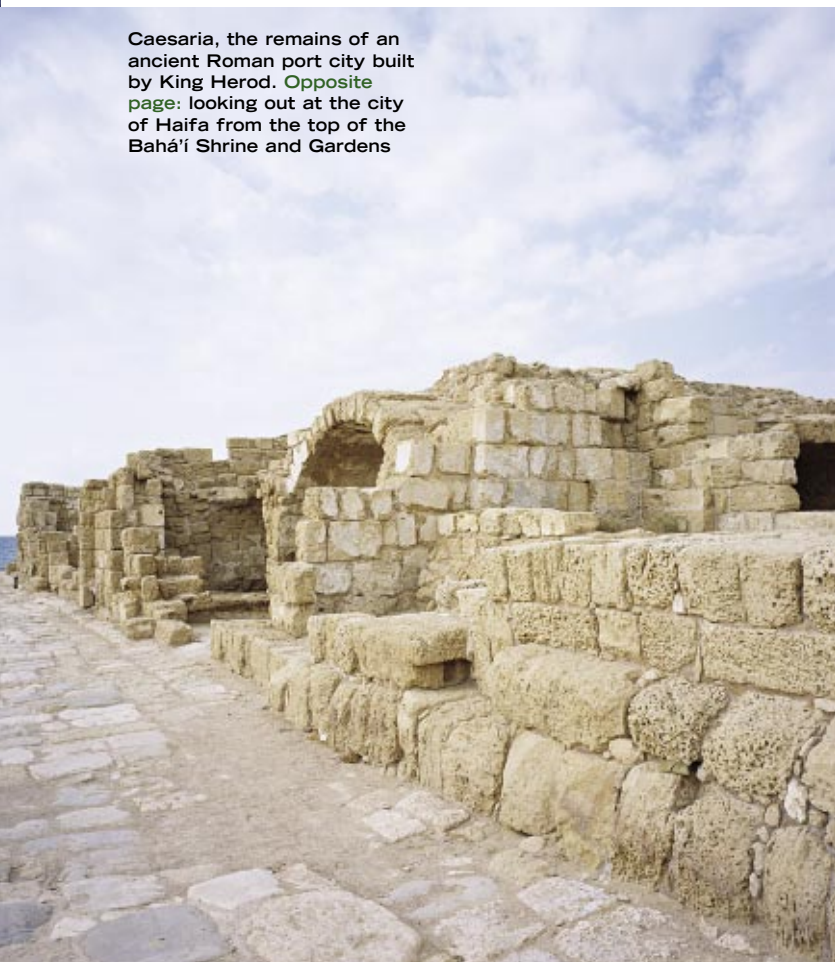
Wineries speckle the Israeli map, with five regions and numerous microclimates that range from the Negev, a desert region in the southern sector, to the Upper Galilee and the Golan Heights in the north. The mountains around Jerusalem, according to Rogov, are the place to visit if you have limited time. The top wineries there are Castel, Flam, Sea Horse, Ella Valley, and Tzora. Highlights of Samaria, where Zichron Yaakov is located, include the Carmel Winery and two others that Rogov rates as top-shelf: Margalit and Amphorae. On my own tasting journey, I end up bypassing a lot of worthy spots. Rogov might chasten me for lacking dedication. I prefer to think it's because I also have other interests.

So I drive to Caesaria, site of the preserved ruins of what was once a great port city built by King Herod, the pro-Roman monarch known by some for his ambitious projects and by others for slaying John the Baptist. New multimedia exhibits at Caesaria imaginatively reconstruct what was once a great satellite of Rome. Later, I make my way up the coast to Haifa, to the Bahá'í Shrine and Gardens, a marvelous cultivated and wild garden that carpets Mount Carmel. Turning east, the names on road signs are familiar intersections of myth, history, and modern life: Nazareth, the now-Arab town where Jesus grew up; Mount Tabor, the traditional site of the Transfiguration of Jesus; Capernaum, which Christians believe is the site where Jesus performed miracles including walking on water; and Migdal, the birthplace of Mary Magdalene. Eventually I reach Tiberias, the resort city along the Galilee, a modest-sized lake that somehow became known as a "sea."

The next morning I head into the Upper Jordan Valley. The altitude rises steadily into the plateau of the Golan Heights. In the distance, gauzy rain clouds hang atop Mount Hermon, which spreads out over Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, providing the region with an extraordinary sight as well as alpine skiing. From a military lookout point, the Syrian town of Quneitra is visible, and on a less hazy day, one might see Damascus, just 25 miles away.

Many roads are fenced off with warnings about land mines, an uncomfortable reminder of the area's strife. But my own peaceful mission resumes at the Golan Heights Winery. This winemaker put Israel on the world's oenological map when it released its first

Caesaria, the remains of an ancient Roman port city built by King Herod. *Opposite page:* looking out at the city of Haifa from the top of the Bahá'í Shrine and Gardens



bottles in 1984. Now, it is Israel's third-largest producer. Its Yarden, Golan, and Gamla are regular series; a fourth, Katzrin, is released only in exceptional years. Golan Heights, like Tishbi, is a Napa-style winery, with a shop that displays a considerable range of styles — the usual European suspects, but also the less usual varieties, such as a wine made from the Nebbiolo grape and a sweet wine called HeightsWine, a play on the German *eiswein*. To one side is the tasting room, a bright space with a long, horseshoe-shaped oak bar and glass windows looking out on the sea of vineyards. I prepare once again to drop anchor.

"My friend Rogov suggested that I stop in," I say. "What's available for tasting?"

Rogov, the Guide

The night before my return trip home, I'm back in Tel Aviv. Rogov calls and designates a café in north Tel Aviv for a meeting place. It's a too-popular neighborhood, with the characteristic buzz of Israeli nightlife. The trouble is, it also has the characteristic lack of parking spaces. People pull onto sidewalks and find ways to make their cars fit that would be unacceptable in most of the rest of civilization.

The one I find is too good to be legal.

"If you get a parking ticket," Rogov says, "ignore it."

"You just ignore them?"

"I never get parking tickets."

"Really?"

"I don't have a car."

Rogov has an expansive personality and speaks English with a faintly New York accent, a result of having lived there in his youth, which is decades past, though he claims to have stopped keeping track after age 39. Rogov has gathered many stories during his career as a critic, but not everyone is a fan.

"One winery just sued me," he says. "A restaurateur put out a contract out on me."

Dinner with Your Wine?

Israel's wine scene has blossomed alongside its restaurants, which span the country's ethnic continuum. Two of the best in Tel Aviv are the seafood restaurant **Moul Yam** (03.546.9920) and **Artichoke** (03.566.7770), a haute French restaurant. In Jerusalem, chef-owner Ezra Kedem of **Arcadia** (02.624.9138) uses only native ingredients, some of which are found in the city's outlying hills. **Helena**, in ancient Caesaria (04.610.0108), offers Mediterranean food and a lovely view of the sea. In Zichron Yaakov, **Picciotta** (06.629.0646) is known for its lamb osso buco and Jerusalem artichoke soup. Just north of Haifa, in Acco, the **Uri Burri Lighthouse Square** (04.955.2212) is a fine spot where you can bring your own wine. — T.P.



Daniel Rogov, Israel's leading wine critic

"No kidding!"

"Not to kill me. Just to break my knees. What could I do? I had to tell the truth."

"Listen," I tell him, "I have to make a confession. I told a few people that you suggested that I stop in."

He takes a contemplative pull on his cigarette.

"When you used my name, what did they give you to taste?" he asks.

I pull out my notebook and read off names of a few bottles and wineries. A Dalton reserve sauvignon blanc from 2001; a Yarden cabernet sauvignon from 2004; Tishbi's special reserve merlot from 1999.

Rogov taps the ashes of his cigarette into the ashtray. "Well," he says, "the important thing is that they brought out good wine. If you said my name and they brought out anything less, it might have been insulting." 🍷

Once an assistant editor of the Journal of Israeli History at Tel Aviv University, frequent contributor Todd Pitock now writes, and sips, from his home near Philadelphia.

Getting There: Continental offers two daily nonstop flights to Tel Aviv from its hub in New York/Newark.