

## THE WINE GUY

Excellent kosher wine  
no longer a pipe dream

When I was growing up, kosher wine in the U.S. meant Mogen David and Manischewitz, those syrupy-sweet concord grape beverages that were standard at Jewish ceremonies and celebrations. Although this style still accounts for almost 90 percent of all kosher wine sales, there has been significant progress in the production of quality dry kosher table wines.

About 20 years ago, a handful of brave souls in California, most notably at Hagafen and Gan Eden wineries, decided that kosher wines, despite their image, could be just as good as any other wine. Specifically, they aspired to make dry table wines of a quality suitable for everyday drinking.

Today, the range of kosher wines on the market includes a wide array of grape varieties from numerous countries.

Although Gan Eden recently stopped production, Hagafen Cellars is doing better than ever. Hagafen, which means "the vine" in Hebrew, was founded by Ernie and Irit Weir in 1979 while Ernie was still working at Domaine Chandon.

Weir made his own wine in custom crush facilities until building a winery in 2000 and tasting room in 2002 on the Silverado Trail (on the east side of California's Napa Valley). He produces about 8,000 cases a year and bottles 11 types of wine, mostly from Napa Valley grapes and mostly from his own vineyards.

Hagafen is small, though, compared to the Royal Wine Corp., owned by the Herzog family, whose winemaking roots date to 19th-century Europe. Although Royal still makes the sweet-style kosher wine under the Kedem brand, the company is the largest producer, importer and distributor of dry kosher table wines.

Royal imports a variety of French wines, including well-known Bordeaux Château Gis-



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cours, Château Labegorce and Château Yon-Figeac. It also collaborates with Baron Edmund Rothschild to produce kosher Bordeaux under the Rothschild name and import highly regarded Champagne Laurent Perrier and Nicholas Feuillatte. Royal also imports Gamla, Barkan and Carmel from Israel, and wines from Australia, Canada, Chile, Hungary and Italy. In California, its value-priced Baron Herzog brand and Herzog Special Reserve line have garnered numerous awards and high ratings.

So what makes wine kosher? Basically, the wine must be produced in accordance with Jewish dietary laws and thus be suitable for consumption by religious Jews, particularly during Jewish religious ceremonies (such as the Sabbath and Passover). From grape crushing to bottling, only Sabbath-observant Jews may handle the grapes and wine. Only certified kosher materials may be used, including the equipment and machinery used to make and age the wine, as well as yeasts and filtering and clarifying agents. For a wine to remain kosher, a Sabbath-observant Jew must open it.

These rules do not apply if the wine is pasteurized, a process called mevushal. The religious requirements for a mevushal wine are not as demanding as for strict kosher wine, as mevushal wine may be handled by non-observant Jews or non-Jews and still be considered kosher.

Nowadays, mevushal usual-

ly means the crushed juice has been "flash pasteurized," (heated at very high temperatures for just a few seconds and then cooled immediately). Producers insist the process does not harm the taste and may even improve the aroma, especially in white wines. This certainly proved true with the Hagafen 2005 Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley (\$15), 2005 White Riesling Napa Valley (\$21), and 2005 White Riesling Potter Valley (\$16). The wines were quite aromatic, lively and full of fruit.

Still, there is continued debate in the wine world over the effects of this practice on the quality of the wine. Many wine critics insist that any heating of a wine can ruin it. Over the years, though, I have seen ratings of mevushal wines ranging from good to excellent.

The question may be whether those wines would have been rated higher had they not been pasteurized. It seems to me the only way to tell for sure is to compare the same wine before and after pasteurization.

Certainly, the 2002 Hagafen Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley (\$40) I tasted seemed to suffer no ill effects. It was full-bodied, with a solid tannic structure and pure black fruit flavors; it was worthy of any table.

So, whether or not you are Jewish, give these wines a try. And don't think of them simply as kosher wines; think of them as quality wines that just happen to be kosher.

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## WINE: Producers, critics differ on pasteurization

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