



## ANTINORI WINE DINNER AT KENNEDY CENTER ROOF TERRACE

The Roof Terrace Restaurant at the Kennedy Center will host a dinner featuring the wines of the Antinori family of Italy on Dec. 21. A representative of the winery will preside over the four-course dinner by Chef Jose Urrutia, \$100 per person. Call (202) 416-8555 for info.

**SCOTT GREENBERG** *Vine Guy*

# An Old Testament to new wines

At first, I thought the invitation was a mistake. I reread the e-mail twice to make sure I understood: I was being asked to join several winemakers from the Judean Hills region of Israel to sample their wares.

Thoughts of Passovers past and the requisite four glasses of overly sweet wine danced through my head. Call it guilt or curiosity, but I decided to put my preconceived notions aside and graciously accept their offer. I'm glad I did.

Over the past 25 years, the Israeli wine industry has undergone a significant transformation from producers of "syrupy sacramental wines" to a trade bent on crafting quality wines of distinction. One area where this revolution has begun to show considerable signs of success is in the Judean Hills, a politically stable region of gently rolling hills situated between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

While most of the Israeli wine industry is located in Galilee and the Golan Heights in the northern part of Israel, the gentle slopes of the Judean Hills are positioned in the middle of the country, where they are delineated by the mountains north of Jerusalem and the Yatir Forest in the south. It is an ancient wine-growing region, documented by numerous archaeological sites where pre-Roman era wine presses have been discovered. As Shuki Yashuv, owner/winemaker of Agur Winery playfully put it, "we have been making wines here since Noah stepped off the Ark."

Today, the region, which accounts for roughly 7 percent of Israel's wine production, is often described as an artisan community, reminiscent of California's Central Coast. It is home to more than 28 wineries where "patience" and "passion" are the hallmark words of winemakers and a collaborative spirit permeates the

industry. Fortunately, a handful of wines from the Judean Hills have recently started to make their way into the U.S. marketplace, and more are on the way.

The three wineries whose wares I had an opportunity to sample — Agur, Ben-Hanna and Domaine du Castel — have done much to promote Judean Hills wines. The winemakers from each of these producers share a passionate desire to compete in the worldwide marketplace for quality wines. I think they are on their way. The wines can be found at Schneider's of Capitol Hill and Potomac Wine and Spirits, both in Washington. Retail prices are approximate.

### 2004 Agur "Kessem" Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot, Judean Hills (\$23):

Kessem, which in Hebrew means "magic," is also an acronym for the first letters of the varietals cabernet sauvignon (70 percent) and merlot (30 percent) in the blend. This magical wine leads with prominent scents of vanilla and red berry fruit on the nose and round, full flavors of black cherries and dark plums on the beautifully constructed frame and the long, elegant finish. I would try this with any game fowl.

### 2004 Agur "Special Reserve" Cabernet Sauvignon, Judean Hills (\$28):

The 18 months this wine spends in new oak (mostly French) barrels barely tames its massive structure. Aromas of dusty dark fruit literally transport you to an ancient place, but the beautiful red cherry and blackberry fruit bring you back to the present on the lovely finish. It's a sure-fire winner with steak.

### 2004 Ben Hanna Winery Single

### Humped Merlot, Judean Hills (\$19):

Aside from being my favorite label, I was also intrigued by this wine's aroma. It literally smells of the desert (the grapes are sourced from the Boker River Ranch Vineyards in the middle of the Negev Desert) — a dusty, earthy nose with hints of cherry and strawberry fruit that continue on in the mouth, where notes of cinnamon and more "earthiness" compliments the blueberry accents found on the pleasant finish. Perfect with seared tuna.

### 2003 Ben Hanna Winery Shalem, Judean Hills (\$22):

An equal blend of cabernet and merlot, the wine features a lively bouquet of plums, raspberries and spicy oak. The firm tannins keep the ultra-ripe fruit in check while espresso and herb notes make a contribution to the fruit-driven finish. I think a veal chop is the way to go with this wine.

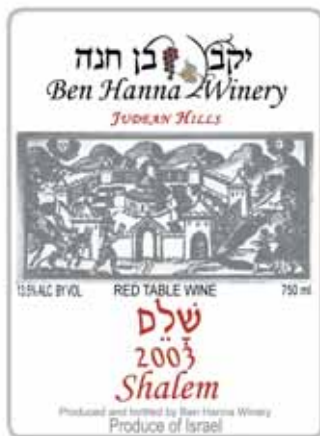
### 2004 Domaine du Castel Petite, Judean Hills (\$25):

The merlot/cabernet blend (60/40, respectively) reveals a complex nose that features plums, vanilla and violet scents. Pretty flavors of bright raspberries, plums and spices play out on the medium-styled, delightful finish. A perfect compliment to soft, creamy cheeses.

### 2004 Domaine du Castel Grand Vin, Judean Hills (\$45):

This wine screams Bordeaux, from its smoky nose featuring rose petals and cassis to its earthy flavors of plum and black fruits up front and the big, strong finish highlighting tobacco and cedar. Even the label is reminiscent of a Grand Cru estate, so it's only proper to enjoy this wine with roasted rack of lamb — Frenched, of course.

While these wines will truly give you a sense of place from an ancient land, they definitely are not your father's Manischewitz.



Do you have a favorite royalty of wine? E-mail me at [scott@vineguy.com](mailto:scott@vineguy.com).

