

# ISRAEL NURTURES GREAT AMBITIONS FOR ITS WINE INDUSTRY

Despite Israel's ancient wine growing traditions, the country is currently breaking new ground through the pioneering efforts of wineries such as Carmel. Export director **Dorit Ben Simon** recounted the company's story so far and outlined its plans for the future.

Israel was making wine and had wineries 3,000 years ago – even the Bible mentions winemaking here. Perhaps because of this long-standing history, Israel's wine industry is fairly well-structured and its vineyards are divided into five distinct wine regions: Galilee, Shomron, Samson, the Judean Hills and Negev.

Within these are myriad terroirs, elevations and climatic influences, all of which help the country's wine industry mitigate the effects of climate change in this already-hot country.

## From high-end through to mid-market

But wine is still the company's primary focus and nowhere is this more evident than in one of its more recent projects – the development of the Yatir winery.

Set amidst the forests dear to Ben-Gurion's vision of the country, Yatir is a boutique winery producing 150,000 bottles of wine a year in the north-eastern Negev region. In 2000, the company began planting 45 hectares of irrigated vineyards here at approximately 900 metres above sea level, with both trees and elevation mitigating the effects of the heat. As befitting of a ground-breaking venture, the winery is aiming for the high-end of the market, with its top of the range Yatir Forest retailing for \$80-100.

Carmel also caters for other price points, however, as illustrated by its Selected brand whose annual sales volume of 6 million bottles makes it the largest-selling label in Israel. Other brands include Private Collection, Appellation and Single Vineyard which are marketed in numerous international markets, including the

Carmel, which produces 14 million bottles a year out of a national total of 40 million and has a staff of 200, owns Israel's two largest wineries and crushes grapes from 1,400 hectares of vineyards spread over the country, enabling it to produce wines across the style spectrum and price points. Its clear French focus in the vineyards underscores its heritage: it was founded in the 19th century by the illustrious Rothschild family who built two wineries at a stupendous cost of 11 million francs.

The Rothschilds subsequently handed the company over to its wine growers in the 1950s; in 2013, Carmel was bought by an international consortium of Jewish businessmen whose plans for the firm include reviving production of brandy and other spirits.

US due to strong demand for kosher wines, along with Europe and Asia where China is a target market.

Improved knowledge of terroir effect and adaptation to climate change are leading the company to focus increasingly on single vineyard wines and there are no plans as yet to stop planting more vineyards in a country where Mediterranean climate and topography combine to create ideal conditions for growing vines.

