

«On the Most Important Reserves of Implementing the Food Program in Uzbekistan»

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Unraveling the mystery of Israel's lost wine-grape varieties

It is a well-known fact that grapevines were a major crop in ancient times. Wine was used both as an everyday beverage, and as an important part of holy ceremonies. In the ancient land of Israel, grapevine products were indeed a most important part of the diet, either as fresh fruit, raisin, grape-juice or fermented wines. There are historic references telling us about a vast wine production, commerce and even exportation out of the region. The big change comes during the Mamluk regime starting in the 13th century. The Mamluks due to religious reasons generally prohibited the growth of wine grapes and the production and consumption of wine, thus applying a final blow to this ancient practice.

In modern history, the reviving of the local wine industry is dated to the middle of the 19th century with the establishment of new wineries in Jerusalem. The production was mostly of "Kidush" sacramental wines, followed some years later with the import of French quality varieties and establishment of a modern wine industry by the officials of the Baron Rothschild. From that point on the Israeli modern wine industry started evolving, growing in size and quality up to our days. Never the less, the modern wines produced today in Israel are all from imported wine varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

Well, you might ask, where is the problem with that? The answer lies in understanding that wine today is more than just a beverage, but is rather a part of national culture. Every wine producing country has its special local varieties that represent around the world its unique terroir and the long tradition of wine production. Unfortunately, for the above mentioned reasons there are no such varieties in Israel to date. In the last two years, with the generous financing of Keren Kayemeth Le Israel - Jewish National Fund, a group of scientists headed by Dr. Elyashiv Drori started a vast research which goals are to find and characterize Israel's lost wine varieties. Up to date, more than 150 accessions of grapevines were collected from the wild, of which about 80 genetically unique (by 15 SSR markers) varieties were obtained. Out of this population, more than 15 varieties show the potential of quality wine production. These varieties were checked against the European databases and have been found unique. In addition, we are involved in a massive effort to "close the circle" by genetically and morphologically characterizing archaeological grape findings from sites in Israel, trying to identify the grape varieties used in the time of king David or in the time of the first or second temples. The identification of potential quality wine producing varieties, that would be connected to ancient times, might be an important innovation to the Israeli wine industry, giving it the story it lacks today.