

In the Land of POMEGRANATES

by Yocheved Lavon

The Torah, in praise of Eretz Yisrael, mentions seven fruits of the land; it is “a land of wheat and barley, of the grapevine, and the fig, and the pomegranate, a land of the olive for oil and [the date for] honey” (*Devarim* 8:8)

Of all the *shivas haminin*, the seven species, the plump, overstuffed pomegranate seems to be getting much more than its share of attention lately. In fact, it’s being labeled left and right as “trendy” and, personally, if something is trendy, I usually consider that reason enough to avoid it. But, if the trend happens to be one of the seven blessed fruits of Eretz Yisrael, I can’t very well turn up my nose at it. And besides, I can’t avoid pomegranates. They’re everywhere: dangling from cheap plastic mobiles in kitschy shop windows and adorning expensive wall hangings in elegant shop windows. Pomegranate is a lipstick color. Pomegranate juice concentrate is prominently displayed on the shelves of



my neighborhood health-food store, and every day health reporters are announcing newly discovered benefits to be had from the fruit and backing up their claims with solid research. And now a family in a little settlement in the Upper Galilee has developed a pomegranate wine.

Concoctions bearing the name “pomegranate wine” have been made before in various forms ranging from home brews, with odd assortments of ingredients, to sugar-laden liqueurs. What’s new about the products of the Rimon Winery is that they are true, world-class wines, fit to compete in international wine exhibitions and to win a gold medal in the “fruit wine” category in a wine fair held last year in Puerto Rico. They’re kosher, too.

All this sounded intriguing, intriguing enough to get me, at **Mishpacha**’s bidding, to embark on a three-hour trip up Israel’s Highway 6, straight through Um-al-Faham and nearly to the Lebanese border, where Moshav Kerem Ben Zimra lies, on that hazy late-winter day, utterly silent ex-

cept for the chirping of little birds in the bare apple trees.

A young lady named Miri, who runs the Visitor’s Center of the Rimon Winery, greeted me and my companions with coffee and crackers first, and then treated us to a private wine-tasting party. What a way to celebrate Rosh Chodesh Adar!

First, she carefully pours about an ounce of Rimon’s Blue Label dry wine into a big tulip glass. This, she explains, leaves room to “air out” the wine by gently sloshing it around in the cup. It should be mellowed in this way and left for several minutes before drinking. While we wait, Miri begins to tell us about the origins of the Rimon Winery.

Let’s Do It!

Miri’s father and brother, Gabi and Avi Nachmias, respectively, are the prime movers behind the enterprise, which makes three wines. Her husband, Sharon, has proven indispensable in every aspect of the business, from building the beautiful Visitor’s Center, with its understated decor, to the winemak-

Why are we suddenly hearing so much about pomegranates? Is there any substance to the super-food hype? Mishpacha traveled to Israel’s northern border, where a moshav family has every reason to believe there really is something to it. And what’s more, they have turned pomegranates into a world-class wine.

ing itself. Sharon even made the sparkling light fixture that hangs over the wine bar, a lovely arrangement of hand-blown, pomegranate-shaped glass bulbs.

It all began ten years ago, when Gabi Nachmias, a founding member of Moshav Kerem Ben Zimra, learned about the remarkable health-promoting properties of the pomegranate. Fired up with enthusiasm, he decided to cultivate the fruit. He didn’t stop there; his strong innovative streak prompted him to try developing new breeds of pomegranate, hoping to hit upon a super-fruit, jam-packed with the vitamins, antioxidants, and other compounds that have made the pomegranate an international celebrity.

Using traditional grafting methods, Mr. Nachmias produced one breed after another. One day, upon tasting the fruit of his latest experiment, Mr. Nachmias noticed it was exceptionally sweet. An analysis of the fruit’s sugar content revealed that this new breed contained natural sugars at a level equivalent to grapes. To a family living in that vineyard-dotted region of Israel, the implications were clear.

The winery began as a family endeavor, as in “Okay, let’s try making some wine out of this stuff.” They started by making a few hundred bottles, which they shared with neighbors and friends. Those first bottles were well received by all, and the Nachmias family began to see potential here.

“Then, my brother Avi came back to Israel after spending a few years in Aus-



The harvest is long over. Late-winter view at the Rimon Winery



This way to the winery...



A cure for cancer? Pure pomegranate oil in a hand-blown glass bottle

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A picture is worth a thousand words

tralia," says Miri. "He was looking around for something to do and, when he saw what my father was doing, he said, 'That's it! I'm going to open up a winery here!'" Avi went into action, and today he is manager of the Rimon Winery.

The dry wine is ready for tasting. It looks and smells so much like a conventional dry rose wine that we have to be careful to remember to make a *shehakol* blessing, not a *borei pri hagafen*. The taste is delicious. The original flavor of the pomegranates is still there, along with nuances imparted by aging the wine in barrels of French, American, and Romanian oak.

Next, Miri pours out the Black Label dessert wine. It is, as you'd expect, very sweet and fruity, with a bright, cherry-like taste, but light, not syrupy.

All the Rimon wines are true wines, Miri explains, in that they are naturally fermented from pomegranate juice alone, without added sugar. The dry wine is made by allowing the juice to ferment until most of its sugar has turned to alcohol, whereas with the sweet wine, the fermentation process is cut short so that the natural sweetness is retained.

Nevertheless, the dessert wine has rather a high alcohol content for wine, fifteen percent. That would explain why we're beginning to feel so cheerful. Isn't it a good thing we came in Adar? When I ask Sharon about the anomaly of the sweet wine's alcohol content, he explains that they stop the fermentation process by adding a quantity of alcohol, also produced naturally from pomegranates, sufficient to kill the yeast responsible for fermentation.

Perhaps the Rimon Winery's most impressive achievement is their port-style wine. Bearing a silver label emblazoned

only with the word "pomegranate," this wine is produced by eighteen months of aging in oak barrels under the warm Galilean sun. It has a particularly rich, complex flavor and a whopping eighteen percent alcohol content.

So, there you have an assessment from a non-expert who enjoys a sip of good wine now and then.

Looking around the Visitor's Center, we notice that the color in the decor is provided mainly by the richly-hued products themselves, displayed on wooden shelves built into the recesses in plain, eggshell-colored walls. In addition to wine, skin-care products containing pomegranate extracts are offered for sale, alongside attractive knickknacks, mostly pomegranate-themed, and a few other natural food products. "The skin creams are made by another company in cooperation with us," Miri tells us.

Don't Waste Those Seeds!

After the wine tasting, Miri takes us out to the production floor and shows us the machine that opens each pomegranate into a flower-like shape and expels the juicy seeds, or rather the juice sacs enclosing the precious seeds. Yes, it seems that those white seeds that are left in our mouths after we've chewed our wedge of Rosh HaShanah *rimon*, and which we wonder how to get rid of gracefully, contain a precious oil. Miri will show us a sample of pomegranate oil after our tour of the production floor.

Speaking of seeds, Miri's father, Gabi Nachmias, has also developed a breed of pomegranate with soft, edible seeds, ideal for making jam, which is just what was done with it. But, Miri has no jam to show us. "Every jar was snatched from our shelves months ago," she says.

Another machine presses out the juice, which is carried through a pipe to the enormous stainless-steel vats on the other side of the floor. The white seeds come down a chute to be collected and pressed for their oil.

Back in the Visitor's Center, Miri carefully brings out a plastic box from under the counter, and from the box she lifts out an exquisite little glass bottle, in the shape of a pomegranate, capped with a tiny cork. It looks like an expensive perfume, but the ounce or so of golden liquid in the bottle is pure pomegranate oil. At 200 shekels (roughly \$50) a bottle, it is indeed an expensive item, but if it wards off cancer, as research suggests it does, it seems well worth the price. And, when you consider that it takes six tons of fruit to make every bottle of oil, the price begins to sound downright reasonable. "Just a drop or two a day, taken internally, can help to prevent

cancer, especially breast cancer," says Miri. And yes, the lovely little bottles are also handmade by her husband, Sharon. "It's just a hobby of his," she murmurs modestly.

Oak From Around the World

In the meantime, Sharon, the amateur glass-blower, has been busy carrying oak barrels on a forklift into the storage area. Once the barrels are in place and the traffic stops, we're allowed in, and Sharon is free to tell us about the role of the oak barrel in the winemaking process.

Many of the barrels used at the Rimon Winery are manufactured in Australia, but the wood they're made of comes from the oak forests of France or America. Recently, the Rimon Winery has also added some Romanian oak barrels to its collection.

"Each variety of wood imparts its own flavors to the wine," says Sharon. "The American oak gives a slight taste of vanilla. French oak gives undertones of dark fruits, such as berries, plums, and cherries. And the Romanian oak adds a hint of spicy flavor. We like to use several kinds of barrels and then mix the wines to create our own unique blends."



A big glass leaves room to aerate the wine

Now I understand why I've read descriptions of wine claiming that it has undertones of "vanilla oak." And I'd thought the people who wrote those catalogues were just being silly. You learn something new every day.

A few statistics: the smaller barrels in Rimon's stock hold 225 liters, while the larger ones hold 300. The harvest and winemaking season is in the fall, from

September through December. This fall, the Rimon Winery produced about 260,000 pint-and-a-half bottles of wine.

In Israel, you won't find Rimon wines in your supermarket; they are a little too pricey to be a supermarket item. They are available at wine shops, and you'll also see them as gift-basket items in fancy flower and chocolate shops. Their price isn't surprising, by the way, given the fact that pomegranates are only about thirty percent juice, as opposed to grapes, which are eighty percent juice. No wonder Chazal considered wine to be the principal product of the grapevine, upon which we make the brachah specific to the *gefen*, the vine, rather than on the grapes we eat.

The winery exports its products to the US, where they're sold at prices comparable to other good, medium-priced wines, and also to Japan, but they have not yet begun exporting pomegranate wine to Europe.

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Black Label Dessert Wine

Just Another Health Fad?

We end our tour by sitting down to peruse an album full of clippings, from both ancient and modern sources, extolling the virtues of the pomegranate. Most of these have to do with health; some have to do with beauty.

We know from *aggadata* in the Talmud that Rabbi Yochanan was a man of extreme beauty. The Gemara tells us that one who wishes to get some idea of how radiant his face was should take a silver cup still glowing from the silversmith's furnace, fill it with red pomegranate seeds, crown it with red roses, and then place it between the sunlight and the shade. We can imagine what a stunningly beautiful sight that would make, yet the Gemara says this is only a faint semblance of Rabbi Yochanan's beauty.

As for health, the Rambam in his time considered the *rimon* to be particularly useful for healing wounds (apply a poultice of pomegranate peel to the wound); as a remedy for stomach ailments, which, as the Rambam points out, are hard to treat, given the fact that whatever

medicine is given tends to come right back up; and as part of his prescription for hangovers (drink the juice unheated). The pomegranate, according to the Rambam, can also reduce cravings for sweets, due to its ideal balance between sweetness and acidity.

Modern research offers an interesting take on this concept. A study led by Professor Michael Aviram, of the Lipid Research Laboratory at the Technion Faculty of Medicine in Haifa, Israel, revealed that, unlike other fruit sugars, the sugar in pomegranates is actually beneficial to people suffering from Type-2 diabetes. Subjects who drank an ounce and a half of pomegranate juice daily for three months were found to have a significantly reduced incidence of atherosclerosis and, furthermore, the drink didn't raise their blood-sugar levels. Prof. Aviram attributes this to the fact that although pomegranate juice contains the same sugars as other fruit juices, they are present in a special form in the pomegranate, being bound to "unique antioxidants" that prevent the retention

of LDL cholesterol in the arteries. This is equally good news for non-diabetics.

Other research suggests that the antioxidants in pomegranates are a powerful weapon against cancer, especially breast and prostate cancers. In a laboratory study, breast-cancer cells were exposed to pomegranate oil, the same product that Miri showed us in the lovely little bottle. The oil triggered a "self-destruct" mechanism in the sick cells. Another study, conducted by Dr. Ephraim Lansky, pomegranate research pioneer of the Technion Entrepreneurial Incubator in Haifa, Israel, tested the effect of pomegranate wine and peel extracts on both normal and cancerous breast cells. The vast majority of healthy cells were unaffected, while over seventy-five percent of the estrogen-dependent cancer cells, and roughly half of the non-estrogen dependent cancer cells, were destroyed.

Says Miri, "We make our wine by a process that not only retains the antioxidant content, as well as the rich supplies of vitamins A, C, E, and iron, but actually increases it, as the juice becomes more concentrated through evaporation."

The connection between pomegranates and estrogen may hold great promise for women in their middle or later years. Synthesized estrogen drugs are often prescribed to protect these women against heart disease and osteoporosis but, at the same time, they raise concerns about increased risk of cancer. Pomegranates contain estrone, one of the three estrogens that occur naturally in the human body, as well as a variety of phytoestrogens, plant compounds that mimic the beneficial effects of estrogen and can sometimes avert the need for any other estrogen-replacement therapy. According to Dr. Lansky, pomegranates seem to fulfill a double role, acting as both an es-



Heals all wounds?

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trogen replacement and a selective destroyer of estrogen-dependent cancer cells. Miri tells us that many people come to buy wine and to tell the Nachmias family how much it has helped them in their fight against cancer or high blood pressure.

Trendy or not, it appears that we have more than just a fad here. Before we say goodbye, I ask Miri how her Kerem Ben Zimra fared in last summer's war against Hizbullah. "It was hard," she says quietly. "We're only a kilometer away from the border, and plenty of missiles fell here. And now they're saying that it might be about to start up again."

What can we say, before we head back to the relative safety of central Israel, except to give her our heartfelt brachah that Hashem should watch over her, her loved ones, and their property? It has truly been a lovely visit. ■



Sharon at work: The last oak barrel is now in place

"Each variety of wood imparts its own flavors to the wine. The American oak gives a slight taste of vanilla. French oak gives undertones of dark fruits, such as berries, plums, and cherries. And the Romanian oak adds a hint of spicy flavor"



Products for sale at the Visitor's Center



Sparkling pomegranates light up the wine bar