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Just breathe: Herzog legacy lives on with new wines

By Amy Klein



When Eugene Herzog was driven from Czechoslovakia by the communist regime in 1948, he was forced to leave behind his wineries. With little money to his name and his family in tow, he moved to Brooklyn and took a job at a small kosher winery. But the types of wine they sold horrified him: sweet, syrupy Concord grape, produced locally with lots of sugar to raise the alcohol content.

As a vintner with experience in kosher and non-kosher labels, Herzog knew real wine. After all, his grandfather, Philip Herzog, had made wine for Emperor Franz-Joseph, who had made him a baron.

By 1958, Eugene Herzog had inherited the winery, calling it Royal Wines. The next few decades were an era of sweet wine, with boldly unapologetic ad campaigns such as, "Wine so sweet you can cut it with a knife" and "the sweeter the better," solidifying -- sullyng -- kosher wine's reputation -- until today.

No wonder why when last Passover a man ordered thousands of dollars worth of the finest wines from the new Herzog winery in Oxnard, he included a case of Cr?me of Concord Malaga. "Sir, why, among all these wines are you ordering this sweet stuff?" asked Joseph Herzog, the youngest of Eugene's grandsons, who runs the Oxnard winery, gift shop and its gourmet restaurant, Tierra Sur. "This is what we always drank at our seder," the man, a secular Jew, told him.

"But that's because you had to drink that," Herzog argued. "There were no other kosher wines then. Today, you can drink good wine at your Seder, kosher wine, red wine. I'm sure your father and grandfather would have done the same." This wine aficionado, according to Herzog, just shrugged and went ahead with his purchase.

It's hard to fight tradition.

But that's what the Herzog family -- and the entire kosher wine industry -- is trying to do: change how people perceive kosher wine.

"Kosher wine has the baggage of being thought of as sweet wine or blessed wine. People hear it's blessed, and they don't want to taste it. We want to change the image."

Herzog is just one of many kosher labels around the world that hope to change the image of kosher wine. It's a two-pronged battle: The first is to change the perception of kosher wines in the mainstream world; the second is to change the kosher wine drinker's palate to appreciate finer wines.

Consider this: Before Passover, many supermarkets feature Herzog wines in a special

display in the front of the store. "They'll buy the wine and then come back [after Passover] and ask where is the Baron Herzog?" Joseph Herzog said. "When they're shown to the kosher section, they won't buy it again."

"We're trying to get our wines in non-kosher sections," he said. Stores like Trader Joe's don't separate out kosher wines. "We're trying to make wines where people say, 'Wow! I never knew kosher wine is that good!' It's made the same, the only difference is that Orthodox and Shabbat-observant people make it."

Which is not exactly true. While kosher wine and non-kosher wine mostly use the same ingredients -- except for animal-based fining products and uncertified yeasts -- and they utilize the same winemaking process, kosher wine must be made only by Sabbath-observant Jews. This is because in biblical times, wine was used in idolatry, so rabbis forbade use of any wine or grape juice that had been handled by a non-Jew.

Today, a non-Jew cannot have touched uncooked grape products for them to be kosher. How can anyone drink kosher wine then?

Most commercial kosher wine is pasteurized, or cooked (mevushal). Like a number of other high-end kosher wineries around the world, Baron Herzog Royal Wineries label, started in 1985, sells a limited amount of nonpasteurized wine -- for example, its new port and pinot noir, which could not survive the cooking process -- but those products have limited usage for religious Jews, for example, who might be worried about a non-Jewish housekeeper or guest touching the bottle.

For the most part, kosher wines from around the world -- Australia, Spain, France, Italy and, of course, Israel -- have been reviewed well by wine critics and have scored competitively against their non-kosher counterparts.

But the main consumers of kosher wines are still people who keep kosher. Do the dry, refined wines appeal to them?

Gracing many an Orthodox Shabbat table as regular as gefilte fish is the iridescent blue glass of Bartenura, a sweet, bubbly libation with a low alcoholic content, that tastes more like fizzy cotton candy than wine.

"What's happening in the food world is happening in the wine world," said Herzog, referring to the gourmet revolution that has influenced many kosher consumers. "There's a new generation who are interested in drier wines," he said, noting that there are many people becoming kosher who want the same type of wines they had when they weren't observant.

As to others who prefer grape juice, dessert wines like muscat (very popular) and wine-cooler-like liquid -- those who don't know any better -- Joseph Herzog said the company produces "stepping-stone" wines before they go for the big leagues.

"People are afraid to try cabernet. Real dry wine that dries out your whole mouth," he said "We're trying to get them educated into the better wines and change the meaning of kosher wine."