



**Written by**  
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*21 Jul 2017*

## An advance party from the Judean Hills



**Julia writes** The Judean Hills Quartet came to London at the end of March carrying not stringed instruments but bottles and smart brochures. This misty image was on the cover.

Four of the producers whose wines are described below – Castel, Flam, Sphera and Tzora (their protagonists are pictured below, left to right Eran Pick MW, winemaker at Tzora; Eli Ben Zaken, owner/winemaker of Castel; Doron Rav Hon, founder and winemaker at Sphera; and Golan Flam, owner and winemaker of Flam) – have joined forces as the Judean Hills Quartet in an attempt to raise the profile of their region, to 'provide a window into the rebirth of a beautiful wine region,

with a deep history', as well as to promote their own wines. They presented a small selection at a dinner attended by Jancis and at a tasting I went to the next day. There was apparently a similar attempt with a bigger group in the early 2000s but it foundered on a multiplicity of objectives. These four describe their first event in London as 'a guerrilla attack', based on common goals, long-standing friendships and the fact that they all export to the UK – most of the other producers in the region do not. Of the four, only Sphera, making exclusively whites, is not producing *kosher* wines.



Coincidentally, Jancis was recently sent wines from Seahorse and Psâgot, and Adam Montefiore, formerly of Carmel, sent me a selection from a new company run by his children that buys in fruit and rents winery space. Hence this collection of 31 reviews.

While there are five officially recognised Israeli regions whose names are used on labels, the Judean Hills being one of them, the process of establishing geographical indications in Israel is still frustratingly incomplete. [See Edan Parulfan's entry in our recent wine writing competition. Omer Korman of Psâgot, for example, calls the region Jerusalem Mountains 'since that is the term the late Daniel Rogov used in his review books, and therefore we assume it to be a better known term internationally' - JR.] We were told that there is a council working on nomenclature and the process should be complete in a few months. (I sense some updates to wine reference books will be required.)

The Judean Hills region lies between the Mediterranean, which is only 40–50 km away and blows winds that ventilate the vines, and Jerusalem. It is a region where smaller producers are proliferating. There are now more than 30 of them in this rugged landscape that enjoys a Mediterranean climate – warm, dry summers and cool, wet winters – at elevations between 400 and 800 m (1,310–2,620 ft) with higher mountains rising up behind the hills. The region is also dominated by soils conducive to wine quality in both reds and whites: a thin layer of *terra rossa* clay on a limestone bedrock.

The most significant change in the last 20–30 years has been the move to plant in the mountains rather than in the valley. Having set up a big tasting of local wines, the members of the quartet suggested that the common thread to their wines, the expression of terroir, is 'elegant, not super-fruity wines ... more gentle, with a flavour profile of garrigue [common in the region] and Mediterranean spices'. The wines I tasted varied a good deal in style but certainly avoided the overripe, raisined fruit that can be the produce of such a climate.

They explained how complex is the system of *landholding in Israel*: more than 90% of land is owned by the State of Israel, the Development Authority or the Jewish National Fund and is leased on long-term contracts, typically of 99 years. Land is generally given to settlements and then, ideally, divided up equably among the settlement's families. This clearly has an impact on

vineyard ownership since the government could decide it wanted to change land use from agriculture to roads, for example. When I asked Doron Rav Hon of Sphera what happened at the end of the 99 years, he replied: 'It has never happened yet ... we are still a young country' but apparently they are starting to see changes in the housing sector, with private individuals buying land from the government.

The more considered approach to vineyard sites extends from higher elevations to deliberations as to which varieties or clones to plant where, as well as how best to protect the vines for the fierce sun, for example by orienting vine rows west to east, keeping some leaf cover on the fruit, use of nets that both protect the fruit from predators such as foxes (a particular problem for Zorah's Syrah, apparently) and reduce radiation. Harvesting at night improves wine quality, and reduces the need for acidification, which is common. Irrigation is essential for vine survival and can also be used to slow down ripening. In the Sphera vineyards, Rav Hon has had to bury the irrigation pipes so that they are safe from marauding foxes and porcupine.

Castel's Eli Ben Zaken pioneered wine-growing in the modern era when he planted vineyards in the Judean Hills in the late 1980s. What started as a hobby, and a way of retaining the lease on some land near his house that was going to be given to someone else, eventually became a business producing 300,000 bottles. I found his C Blanc Chardonnay epitomised the style of several of the wines presented by the group: New World fruit flavours but with the freshness and structure more often associated with European regions.

During the tasting the question of organic viticulture was raised. With around 50% humidity and little mildew pressure, it would seem a serious possibility. However, the issue all growers still face is lack of clean plant material, notably vines affected by *leafroll virus*, and there is no organic remedy for this. The problem did not become clear until about 15 years ago and Zorah, for example, have had to replant 40% of their vineyards. In the current situation, organic or biodynamic farming would be 'suicidal', even though the climate is potentially conducive to such practices.

With regard to red wines, Master of Wine Eran Pick (Israel's first and only MW), winemaker at Zorah, gave a useful point of comparison: 'We are more southern Rhône than Bordeaux', and his assessment is that blends are better than varietal wines but that the region trumps both: 'We used to think that varieties were most important and now we think region of origin is more so.'

The Quartet and other producers in the Judean Hills are brave to take this initiative in the crowded UK market but from the quality point of view, there is no reason they cannot succeed and make vinous music.

The wines are grouped alphabetically by producer and, within those group, are listed in the order tasted.

## **CASTEL**

- Castel, C Blanc du Castel 2014 Judean Hills *Inspired by a bottle of Puligny-Montrachet he and his wife drank in Puligny in 1985, Chardonnay has always been very important to owner and winemaker Eli Ben Zaken. Fermented and aged sur lie for nearly a year in French oak (1/3 new). Full malo.*

Rich, ripe and quite oaky, more oaky than the Sphera Chardonnay, for example. Intense, spicy and oaky on the palate too but has a delicious creamy, ripe fruit flavour, more apricot than

citrus. Rather New World in style in terms of fruit character but the freshness and structure are more European. (JH)13.5% Drink 2016-2020

17

- **Castel, Grand Vin 2014 Judean Hills** *This is Eli Ben Zaken's 'left-bank blend'. 45% Cabernet, 50% Merlot (more than usual) plus Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc and Malbec, according to the Castel website. 20 months in mostly new French oak, tight grain. He is considering bringing it down to 18 months and he wants to start using his new concrete tanks that give texture and density. Long cold pre-ferment maceration - 10 days at 8 °C. 10-day ferment and then 10-20 days' post-ferment vatting. He generally prefers Merlot, though it is not as easy as Cabernet Sauvignon in Israel because it has a short picking window and to be good it has to be planted on the hills not on the plain. Three different yeasts and three different coopers.*

Dark ruby. Fresh and a little peppery on the nose. Elegant, lightish and with good freshness.

Quite dark-fruited on the palate, dry and tightly textured with the tannins still quite firm and a little chewy. Fine dry finish. (JH)14.5% Drink 2017-2024

16.5+

## FLAM

- **Flam, Classico 2014 Judean Hills** *Founded in 1998 by the brother and mother of the current (Italian-trained) winemaker Golan Flam and still family owned. Single vineyard called Mata, 40 km from the Mediterranean, at 650 m, with big day-night temperature swings. Soils are shallow terra rossa and rocky soils with limestone. Still researching for clones and varieties. They believe Cabernet Franc has great - as yet unrealised - potential in area. Petit Verdot also showing well. Looking for freshness so oak is only 20% new. 47% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Cabernet Franc, 16% Merlot, 13% Petit Verdot, 7% Syrah. Golan Flam suggests you get bolder Cabernets in the Golan Heights and more elegance and freshness in the Judean Hills. Trying to harvest quite early.*

Mid ruby with a fine leafy nose. Great finesse here, finely textured, dry and elegant, with purity and freshness at the core. Beautifully balanced, long and cool. Very fine tannins. (JH)13%

Drink 2017-2020

16.5

- **Flam, Superiore 2006 Judean Hills** *84% Syrah, 16% Cabernet Sauvignon, grown on thin topsoil over a bedrock of limestone. Aged 12 months in French oak (20% new).*

Mid ruby with a slight brick rim. A little spicity on the nose. Leafy and lively with some beginning of undergrowth but still very fresh with dark fruit. Dry, paper-fine texture. Fresh, mouth-watering and lithe. Ageing gracefully even if the alcohol shows a little bit. (JH)13.9%

Drink 2010-2020

16.5

## MONTEFIORE

- **Montefiore 2015 Judean Hills** *65% Colombard, 25% Chardonnay, 10% Sémillon. Cold fermented in tank. No oak.*

Nose combines citrus and a slightly riper and more floral note from the Colombard, then there's a nice weight on the palate that I think must be the Sémillon, perhaps some lees influence, perhaps the odd gram or two of residual sugar. Bright, fruity and zesty with a fresh finish that is both citrus flavoured and slightly chalky in texture. Surprisingly multilayered for an unoaked wine. (JH)12.5% Drink 2017-2018

16

- Montefiore Shiraz/Petite Sirah/Malbec 2015 Judean Hills *Limestone soils. Varieties vinified separately. Unoaked.*

Mid crimson. Blackberry and lightly peppery, dark fruited but not particularly sweet smelling. Juicy and fresh on the palate, lots of crunchy dark fruit and freshness. Tannins are present but rounded so you could drink it with or without food. Not particularly long but all in harmony. (JH)14% Drink 2017-2019

15.5

- Montefiore Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 Judean Hills *Limestone soils. 50% aged in mainly American oak for 8 months.*

Deep crimson. Cassis and a touch of cassis leaf on the nose, plus a note of cedary oak spice. Juicy and fresh on the palate, the oak thickening the tannins a bit but leaving the fruit to take centre stage - cassis again with an attractive slight leafiness. There's a hint of chocolate on the finish that I think is from the oak. Gently chewy and refreshing with good fruit depth and persistence. May well age longer than I have suggested. (JH)14% Drink 2017-2020

16

- Montefiore Syrah 2012 Judean Hills *Limestone soils. 80% aged in French oak, 20% in American.*

Mid crimson with ruby rim. Refined aromas that reveal the oak but also the purity of the peppery dark Syrah fruit. Smooth and fresh on the palate, really good balance between fruit and oak, mellowed by time in bottle but still fresh and youthfully fruity. Very drinkable, ideally with food but the tannins have softened enough that you could drink it on its own. Like all these Montefiore wines, very harmonious. (JH)13.5% Drink 2016-2020

16

- Montefiore, Kerem Moshe 2013 Judean Hills *Kerem Moshe means 'Moses' Vineyard', taken from the original name of the land purchased a century and a half ago by Moses Montefiore, later renamed Mishkenot Sha'ananim, which 'became the cornerstone of modern Jerusalem'. 78% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Petit Verdot, 5% Merlot, 2% Malbec grown on limestone soils. 16 months in French oak barrels.*

Deep ruby red. This smells sweeter than the straight Cabernet and a little more complex, though cassis still dominates the nose, along with some oak sweetness. Lovely fruit here - fully ripe but still fresh, with some red fruit on the palate adding freshness and complexity. A touch of cedar from the French oak but in a supporting role. Cedary and dark on the palate and a long, firm tannic finish but the tannins are ripe and firm and not in the least astringent. Definitely a food wine, with an attractive chalkiness on the finish. Fresh and long. Impressive harmony and still a way to go though drinking well now.. (JH)13.5% Drink 2017-2023

16.5

- Montefiore, Aria Reserve 2013 Judean Hills *'A special limited edition to celebrate the new style of Israeli Mediterranean blend'. 65% Syrah, 20% Carignan, 15% Petite Sirah grown on limestone soils. 16 months in mainly French but also some American oak.*

Mid to deep cherry red. Complex aroma of both black and red fruit, entwined with restrained oak spice, a touch of mocha, but also a more savoury, meaty quality. Rich but not heavy, firm but not tough, just very harmonious and just starting to show some nice tertiary flavours - hinting at a further potential for complexity with time in bottle. Good length and fresh to the end. (JH)13.5% Drink 2016-2023

16.5

**PSÂGOT**

- **Psâgot, Rosé 2016 Judean Hills** A blend of grapes. Mid lipstick strawberry pink. Clean, vibrant, super-fruity nose. Good acidity and grip on the palate and yet with really serious fruit (not industrial). You could so easily imagine lapping this up with some great Israeli food overlooking the beach. Excellent balance. More substance than most rosés but by no means heavy or sweet. 12.9% Drink 2017-2018  
16.5
- **Psâgot, Peak 2014 Judean Hills** *Psâgot is Hebrew for Peak. 42% Syrah, 42% Petite Sirah, 16% Mourvèdre. Mid crimson.*  
Big and ripe on the nose. Lots of ripe fruit and savoury, slightly leathery notes. Very appetising. Smart stuff, though full throttle and clearly the product of lots of sunshine. Good balance even if the tannins are a tad dry at the moment. 14% Drink 2018-2025  
17
- **Psâgot, Edom 2013 Judean Hills** *Blend of 63% Merlot, 16% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Petit Verdot, 10% Cabernet Franc grown on the red granite Edom range to the east of the winery.*  
Deep lustrous ruby. Sweet, intense, well-integrated nose. I don't know what sort of oak was used for the obviously prolonged ageing but it smells as though there was some (good quality) American oak used here. Really rich, velvety and rewarding. There's a little bit of heat on the end but it's all very alluring indeed and the balance is fine. The tannins are mellowing nicely. 14.5% Drink 2016-2022  
17
- **Psâgot, SV Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 Judean Hills** *Single-vineyard wine at 900 m elevation from a 10-year-old producer now making 300,000 bottles a year.*  
Lustrous ruby with a pale rim. Mellow nose. Obviously warm, ripe fruit but certainly refreshing enough. Light dusty overlay but fun to drink. Pretty dry tannins as though the grapes were rather thick-skinned. Not sure the fruit concentration is sufficient to quash the tannins over the very long term. 14% Drink 2016-2020  
16.5

## SEAHORSE

- **Seahorse Wines, James 2014 Samson** *100% 40-year-old dry-farmed Chenin Blanc. Fermented and aged in French oak barrels for nine months.*  
Pale lemon straw colour. Very intense nose with a salty edge somehow. Big-boned fruit but with sufficient acidity. I'm not sure I have ever tasted a 15% Chenin before but this manages to be well balanced. Long and fresh with fruit reminiscent of slightly underripe squashed greengages with a hint of Rose's lime juice. It would be dangerously easy to forget the alcohol level of this and plug it too fast. No sign of oak. 15% Drink 2016-2019  
16.5
- **Seahorse Wines, James 2013 Samson** *100% 39-year-old Chenin Blanc dry-farmed. Fermented and aged in French oak barrels for nine months.*  
Honeysuckle and a hint of popcorn on the nose. Salty start and then reasonably fresh and cool – though you know this was grown in a hot climate. Definitely ready to enjoy with just a slight chewiness on the end. This could be drunk as an aperitif. 13.5% Drink 2015-2018  
16
- **Seahorse Wines, James 2012 Samson** *Unlike the burgundy-shaped bottles used for the 2013 and 2014 vintages of this wine, the 2012 comes in a bordeaux shape. 100% 39-year-old Chenin Blanc dry-farmed. Fermented and aged in French oak barrels for nine months.*  
Quite a bit of evolution on the nose. Pungent and rewarding. But on the palate it seems just a little too sweet to be really really appetising. Good satin texture but a flavour profile that

recalls Vouvray Demi-Sec, including a bit of a green streak on the end, just prior to a little alcoholic heat. 14.5% Drink 2014-2018

16

- Seahorse Wines, Antoine 2014 Judean Hills *Modestly described on the label as Tête de Cuvée. 56% Syrah, 21% Grenache, 13% Mourvèdre, 8% Counoise, 2% Cinsault aged in French oak barrels for 18 months. Unfiltered. Called Antoine after Antoine de St-Exupéry, author of Le Petit Prince.*

Bright ruby. Distinctly gamey nose – almost too much for me. Sweet start and a rather charred edge but some hollowness in the middle. Definitely needs food. Still quite a bit of tannin, and alcoholic heat, on the end. 14.5% Drink 2018-2023

16

- Seahorse Wines, Antoine 2013 Judean Hills *Modestly described on the label as Tête de Cuvée. 56% Syrah, 21% Grenache, 13% Mourvèdre, 8% Counoise, 2% Cinsault (exactly the same assemblage as the 2014) aged in French oak barrels for 18 months. Unfiltered.*

Nicely integrated nose with richness and interest. A pretty good version of Châteauneuf from the Judean Hills! Rather delicious. Salty and savoury on the end with resolved tannins and good acidity. 14.5% Drink 2016-2022

16.5

- Seahorse Wines, Antoine 2012 Judean Hills *72% Syrah, 16% Grenache, 12% Mourvèdre aged in French oak barrels for 18 months. Unfiltered.*

Bright ruby. Ruined by bad TCA alas. 14% Drink ??-??

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- Seahorse Wines, Lennon 2013 Judean Hills *A blend of 82% Zinfandel, 10% Petite Sirah, 8% Mourvèdre dedicated to John Lennon. Aged in American oak for 16 months.*

Light to medium blackish garnet. Very sweet nose redolent of very ripe berries. The palate is much lighter and fresher than the nose suggests. Complex, well-balanced wine that clearly comes from a warm climate but is far from heavy. Notable but not excessive and well-integrated acidity on the end. Recognisably Zinfandel. I wish we could have shown this at our Tribidrag conference in Croatia. 14.5% Drink 2016-2021

17

- Seahorse Wines, Pure Ku. Counoise 2013 Judean Hills *100% of this southern French variety aged in French oak barrels for 24 months.*

Fairly light garnet. Very pale rim. Light, fairly indistinct but definitely warm and sweet nose. A certain dustiness. Round and biscuity. Fairly gentle with a hint of gaminess. Good, well-integrated acidity. Very clean finish but far from concentrated or exceptionally flavourful. 13.5% Drink 2015-2019

16.5

- Seahorse Wines, Elul 2010 Judean Hills *Blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Petite Sirah, 15% Syrah aged in both American and French oak for 22 months.*

Still a pretty deep ruby. Quite lustrous. What a shame! There is clearly real quality here but also some spoiling TCA. I think a bottle with a perfect cork would probably score 17 and still be very vigorous but it's drying on the finish and there's a lack of fruit. Grrr corks... 14% Drink 2016-2024

17

## SPHERA

- Sphera, White Concepts, First Page 2015 Judean Hills *Blend of 50% Pinot Gris, 40% Riesling, 10% Sémillon. Fermented in tank and 50% aged 7 months in French oak, the rest in tank. No*

*acidification and no malo. This wine is apparently very successful in the restaurants of Tel Aviv.*

Unusual, rather herbal aroma but quite hard to describe: there's also a note of Riesling smokiness, Pinot Gris spice (Alsace style) plus a touch of spice from the oak as well as fresh grapefruit-citrus that may come from the Sémillon. On the palate is that same complexity and a real breadth of flavour in the mouth but balanced by excellent freshness and a very direct spicy aftertaste. Highly distinctive and also delicious. I can see why this does so well in restaurants – a great food wine with breadth, depth and length but without too much overt fruitiness and a savoury finish. (JH)Drink 2016-2019

17

- *Sphera, White Concepts Riesling 2015 Judean Hills There's 0.4 ha of Riesling in his village, just 5 minutes from Doron Rav Hon's new winery. Long slow ferment at 8-12 °C over 50 days, stopped with 3.5 g/l of residual sugar. The first vintage of this wine (2013) had 14 g/l RS, the 2014 was very dry and he is now working with around 4-6 g/l. The wine spends 7-8 months in tank and no malo.*

Spicy and ripe, rich in stone fruit and more reminiscent of Alsace Riesling than German versions, except perhaps from the Pfalz, but there's fresh lemon and lime too. On the palate, a fabulous balancing act between rich, spicy citrus – even some orange and apricot – and excellent acidity. Full but precise on the palate. Juicy and full of flavour. Great length and freshness. (JH)12.5% Drink 2017-2022

17

- *Sphera, White Concepts Sauvignon Blanc 2015 Judean Hills Long and cold fermentation in inox. Seven months on the lees with stirring.*

Like all these Sphera wines, they are very distinctive and not easy to describe. Here there is something that reminds me of the earthiness of Silvaner but there's also lively citrus and herbal notes, but nothing overly ripe or pungent. On the palate, a salty citrus flavour and a piercing freshness balanced by the more gentle texture from the lees work. Complete and refined though not particularly concentrated on the mid palate. (JH)Drink 2016-2018

16.5

- *Sphera, White Concepts Chardonnay 2015 Judean Hills 100% Chardonnay from Givat Yeshayahu. Harvested at two different times, one part fermented and aged in older oak, the other part all in tank, then after 7 months blended 40/60 oak and tank. 2015 was a good vintage with fresh acidity but no malo for this wine.*

Subtle creamy citrus aroma with a light mealy/lees richness entwined with the subtle oak spice and just a hint of smokiness. On the palate this is really creamy and deep but with more mineral/stony qualities than obvious fruit flavours, though it has a certain citrus-like purity. Like the First Page, I imagine this would be a very good food wine. Subtle and very long with the freshness so well integrated you don't see it coming until the finish, when it leaves your mouth watering. Like all Doron Rav Hon's wines, classy and a distinctive style. (JH)13% Drink 2016-2020

17

- *Sphera, White Concepts, White Signature 2015 Judean Hills 100% Chardonnay in this vintage, fermentation and ageing in 100% French oak (old barrels). This vintage ageing was 8 months (usually 11) because of move to new location. Winemaker Doron Rav Hon asked me to taste this in a burgundy glass, so I have it in a Zalto burgundy glass. Bottle 1,132 out of 1,940.*

Seductively creamy rich citrus aroma with a touch of spice and a very slight smoky reductive note adding a more mineral quality. This is so classy. Deep and creamy in texture but also fresh and finely shaped. Stunning wine with beautiful harmony and great length. Subtle power that caresses the palate, the flavour lingering long. (JH)Drink 2017-2020

18

- *Sphera, White Concepts, White Signature 2014 Judean Hills 100% Chardonnay, 11 months in oak on the lees but without racking or stirring, 10% new oak. 2014 vintage was more mature and aromatic one than 2015 vintage. No malo.*

Smells richer and riper than the 2015, with a touch of orange adding to the mealy/creamy oak effect. The oak seems a little more obvious too, perhaps because of the riper fruit. Round and rich and spicy but still with terrific freshness in a full-bodied, mouth-filling wine. Not as elegant as the 2015 but with real power and length. Still a way to go. Chewy and extremely satisfying. (JH) Drink 2017-2024

17+

## **TZORA**

- *Tzora, Shores Sauvignon Blanc 2015 Judean Hills Tzora's total production is 100,000 bottles a year. Wine named after the vineyard. Planted 2009 at 670 m. 15 km west of Jerusalem. 100% own vines. Picked in the second week of August and they have to keep the fruit away from the sun because of the high radiation. They harvest by hand at night so that the fruit comes into the winery cool (18 °C). Fermented and aged on the lees in old oak - some barrels are 500 litres - for 7 months. Whole-bunch pressed. Inoculated with yeast.*

Elegant style of oaked Sauvignon Blanc. There's citrus depth, grapefruit, herbs, plenty of freshness and the creamy texture and flavour of the old oak. Not unlike a bordeaux blanc in style. A little light in the middle but real elegance. A little bit smoky, bone dry. You can imagine it will go in the honeyed direction with age. (JH) 13.7% Drink 2017-2020

16.5

- *Tzora, Misty Hills 2013 Judean Hills So named because they get a lot of morning mist in this area, where they were the first to plant on previously unplanted north-facing slopes filled with fossils (though they have come across terraces that are more than a hundred years old). It is now their best plot. They have been working with Jean-Claude Berrouet (long-time winemaker at Petrus) since 2010 and particularly appreciate his expertise on tannin management. Short maceration gives more aromatics and less bitterness, like with tea. 55% Cabernet Sauvignon, 45% Syrah. Harvest quite early, short macerations of 12-18 days, no post-ferment maceration. 16 months in oak, 35% new.*

Deep cherry red. Lots of very clean, fresh cassis. Graphite and dark fruit, terrific finesse here with peppery notes and such lovely chalky texture. Refined, dry and long. Plenty of dark fruit but all wrapped up in a tight, refined structure. (JH) 14.5% Drink 2016-2023

17