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Kosher Wine's Southern Exposure

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3 25 (<http://www.thejewishweek.com/forward?path=node/39215>) (<http://www.thejewishweek.com/print/special-sections/kosher-wine-guides/kosher-wines-southern-exposure>)



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Beckett's Flat boutique winery in Western Australia. Courtesy of Beckett's Flat

Australia has a huge wine industry, producing wines that range from simple plonk to superb quality, yet it boasts only a handful of kosher wine producers. Similarly, New Zealand, though a very much smaller industry, has a fabulous global reputation for quality Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc, but only two kosher wine producers. Like its non-kosher counterpart, the kosher wine industry “down under” offers everything from simple, yet pleasing entry-level quaffers to excellent wines, full of character.

Although Jews came to Australia early in its history, kosher wine arrived much later. Back in 1788, the first Jews to migrate to Australia were convicts – at least eight English Jewish prisoners were known to have been transported to Botany Bay; they were part of the 11-ship “First Fleet” that established a penal colony that would become the first European settlement on the continent (in present-day Sydney). Roughly 1,000 Jewish convicts were shipped there over the next 60 years – an inauspicious start to the Australian Jewish community, though religious communal life of some sort was started in the 1820s.

Fast-forward about 170 years, when dry kosher table wines finally arrived. In the 1980s, Rabbi Chaim Serebryanski organized kosher dry table wine production to serve the local community. His son, Mendel, organized what was basically the rebirth of dry kosher table wine production in 1991, mostly for export. The wine was Teal Lake, a contract brand made for the Herzog family's [Royal Wine Corp.](http://www.royalwine.com) (<http://www.royalwine.com>)

Norman's Wines made Teal Lake until the late-1990s, when it went bankrupt; then the Teal Lake label was shifted to the Tandou Winery, which was later purchased by the Indian winery Chateau Indage and renamed Thachi Wines. Throughout this entire process the wines remained under rabbinic supervision but the quality varied. In 2007, Mendel Serebryanski moved Teal Lake to the respected, family-owned and operated, Victoria-based Andrew Peace Winery. As Serebryanski put it, “The change was just better from all aspects. Andrew Peace is closer to Melbourne, making it easier for the mashgichim [kosher supervisors]; the facilities are superior, the winemaking is superior, the quality of grapes is much better, and it's really just a better winery.”

Along with the Teal Lake brand, [Andrew Peace Wines](http://www.apwines.com/) (<http://www.apwines.com/>), also produces the budget-priced Altoona Hills line of about 12 different wines. All of its kosher wines, about 25,000 cases annually, are also mevushal. Serebryanski was quick

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to note that, despite the mevushal process, “We believe we are now making kosher wines taste the same as mainstream wines. And I can honestly say the last two years our Teal Lake reds have been some of the best coming from our winery.”

In 1998, around the same time as Teal Lake got off the ground, Belizar (Bill) and Noni Ilić of the Margaret River, Western Australia-based [Beckett's Flat boutique winery](http://www.beckettsflat.com.au/) (<http://www.beckettsflat.com.au/>) produced their first kosher wine, a small lot (250 cases) of Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon. As Noni tells it, “Our local cheese factory was producing kosher cheese and the production manager put us in touch with the rabbis who supervised them, as they had expressed interest in pursuing the idea of high-quality kosher wine. It was all sold to an Australian wholesaler.” Beckett's Flat continued production in 1999, and is now imported to the U.S. by [Allied Importers, U.S.A](http://alliedimporters.com) (<http://alliedimporters.com>). “The 1999 Semillon was chosen by The New York Times as its No. 1 pick for Passover 2000,” Noni says. “Following success in the U.S. market, by 2002 the range had grown to five different wines.”

Today, the Beckett's Flatt kosher portfolio is marketed under the Five Stones Label. Only about 20 percent is exported, mostly to the U.S. and Canada (though while researching this the U.S. importer informed Noni that it does not intend to renew the import contract for the next vintage). Most of Beckett's kosher wine is sold domestically, and not only to the Jewish community. “The wines are premium-quality Margaret River wines,” Noni says, “so are quite widely sold to the general public, which probably doesn't know they are drinking a kosher wine. As they are made without the use of any animal products [for fining], there is also a small market for the vegetarian/vegan consumer.”

Meanwhile, the [Harvey River Bridge Estate Winery](http://www.harveyriverbridgeestate.com.au/) (<http://www.harveyriverbridgeestate.com.au/>) in the geographic region of Western Australia makes the “K: Kosher” brand, which was formerly just a kosher brand of its “Joseph River Estate” label. Owned by the Sorgiovanni and Scolaro families, Harvey River Bridge Estate is a highly focused business with strong export sales. Having done some kosher contract wines over the years, the families recognized the value of the kosher niche. As a company spokesperson made clear: “We have been fine-tuning our kosher winemaking for many years and we feel very confident that we produce some of the world's best Chardonnay and Shiraz that is certified kosher for Passover. We use only the highest quality fraction of juices, and after years of practice have the whole kosher winemaking process down to a fine art.”

[The Harkham Winery](http://www.harkhamwine.com) (<http://www.harkhamwine.com>) in the Hunter Valley (New South Wales, Australia) is the only fully kosher winery on the continent. Established in 2005 by Terry Harkham and his son Richard, the Harkham Winery went kosher in 2008, and since then has been producing most of its wines in as natural a way as possible – with organic grapes and no preservatives, additives or sulfites.

Richard, the family winemaker, is passionate about his “natural wine” philosophy. “At Harkham,” he notes, “we try to nurture and embrace what nature gives us. We strive to do everything unadulterated; we go with a wild fermentation – that's where the holiness and spirituality is in wine.”

He continues: “Everything that man adds to wine, the [high-quality] grapes already naturally have inside of them. My wines give you a snapshot of nature – everything that happened in the vineyard in that year. The rain, the sun, animals, insects, the fights we had, everything is there. Everything you add – yeast, tartaric acid – you take away from the natural flavors of the earth and what happened in the vineyard in that year. We don't want to make the wine; we help the grapes become the best wine they can be.”

To this end, Richard takes some unusual steps for a winemaker: He plays the music of Reb Shlomo Carlebach and other uplifting tunes during the processing, and classical music in the barrel room all day and night during the rest of the year. Though fully aware that his approach may strike some as odd, the winemaker is confident that the quality and character of his wines fully deliver.

In New Zealand, there are just two producers: the Nelson-based Goose Bay and the much smaller Marlborough-based O'Dwyers Creek Vineyard.

In the late 1980s, California native Phillip Jones, winemaker and managing director of Goose Bay, moved to New Zealand with his Minnesota-born wife Sheryl. In 1990 the two began planting vineyards in the Moutere Hills of Nelson, rather than the better-known and more popular Marlborough area. Jones thought the gravelly clay loam soil of the rolling hills would improve the fruit. They established their (non-kosher) Spencer Hill winery in 1994. With early critical and commercial success, came expansion – additional vineyard plantings, increased volume, and a growing portfolio.

Four years later, Jones was considering a side project on California's central coast. A local winery owner, whose facility also did a lot of contract wine production, was interested in having Jones make Kiwi-style Sauvignon Blanc for him. "Over lunch he mentioned that they'd been making kosher wine," Jones says. "That can't be a very big business," I said. I was surprised when he told me it was over 50,000 cases. So at the time that slipped into the back of my brain."

Fast-forward to 2002: Jones was considering expansion options and recalled that conversation about this substantial kosher wine niche. He began doing a little research, and contacted the rabbi in Wellington. "So when he next came over to Nelson for kosher supervision visits, as he did fairly often, he paid me a visit. We had a nice talk, and kind of learned together what the rules were for making kosher wine commercially. So we kind of got it started." Realizing that making the wine kosher and selling kosher wine is not the same thing by any stretch, Jones decided to contact the Royal Wine Corp. It, in turn, put Phil in touch with Mendel Serebryanski in Melbourne. In short order, a deal was struck with Royal, and the award-winning Goose Bay wines were born.

Over in New Zealand's wine growing region of Rapaura in Marlborough, is the small [O'Dwyer's Creek Vineyard](http://www.odwyerscreek.co.nz/) (<http://www.odwyerscreek.co.nz/>) owned and operated by Lindsay and Trish Dahlberg. The brand name O'Dwyer's Creek is named after their sustainable certified vineyard on O'Dwyer's Road, near the town of Blenheim. New Zealand's leading wine region, Marlborough is widely considered one of the premium wine regions of the world, particularly for Sauvignon Blanc. Established in 2002 as a "grower" supplying grapes to other wineries, they decided to launch their own brand in 2010. Though not Jewish, the Dahlbergs began producing kosher wine.

As Lindsay explains, some of their Jewish friends "wondered whether we could produce kosher Marlborough wines to match the premium Marlborough non-kosher wines. We decided we could, with their assistance in getting the kosher expertise we needed, provide a quality product to what we saw as a niche market." As O'Dwyer's Creek is a vineyard that makes wine in a nearby contract winemaking facility, rather than an estate winery as such, it cannot rightly be called a fully kosher winery – even though it produces only kosher wines.

As owner Lindsay Dahlberg explained, "We started doing kosher at the same time we moved into producing our own wine in 2010, and all wine is put on the kosher path initially. In fact any non-kosher product is only a by-product of our kosher production, where for efficiency sake it is easier to have those few liters that can't fit into kosher tanks moved to [unsupervised] non-kosher [tanks]. This is then sold off as juice to other non kosher wine companies"

The Dahlbergs produce both Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, though only the Sauvignon Blanc is exported. "We have not been able to convince our U.S. importer to even try it yet," Lindsay notes. They have also just bottled their first Pinot Noir (2013) at the request of their Australian importer, and certainly hope to interest their importer in bringing that to market too. All their wines are kosher 100 percent single vineyard Marlborough wines. In last year's Jewish Week Wine Guide their Sauvignon Blanc was ranked No. 2 for white wines under \$18 and No. 4 in the top white wines category. ♦

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