

WINE

Making Kosher Wine, Finding a Path Back to the Fold



Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

Jeff Morgan, left, Napa Valley winemaker, and Jonathan Hajdu, Mr. Morgan's associate winemaker, test Covenant kosher wine.

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One would expect that the motivation to make great kosher wine would have come via devout Jewish faith. Yet in the case of Jeff Morgan, the reverse occurred; it was through making kosher wine that he discovered his faith.

Mr. Morgan, an author, educator and winemaker in Napa Valley, produces Covenant [cabernet sauvignon](#), California's finest kosher wine. The creation of Mr. Morgan and his backer, Leslie Rudd (Rudd Winery and Vineyards, Dean & DeLuca, Distillery No. 209 gin), Covenant began as a challenge. In 2002 the two, both nonpracticing Jews, were at a fund-raiser for the synagogue in Napa when Mr. Rudd asked, "Why are kosher wines so bad?"

"You know, Les, they don't have to be," said Mr. Morgan, who knew quite a bit about it, having written Wine Spectator's annual kosher wine roundup many times in the '90s.

He had tasted hundreds of kosher wines — a few good, he said, but most bad — and told Mr. Rudd, who owns a celebrated Napa vineyard, “I think I can make the greatest kosher wine in 5,000 years, if you just give me 10 tons of red grapes.”

Mr. Rudd demurred, explaining gently that, if Mr. Morgan failed, his wine would be the worst kosher wine from Rudd vineyards. Instead, he offered to back the project if Mr. Morgan used other grapes. Mr. Morgan was fortunate to win a contract from another top Napa vineyard.

But where to make it? That was the crucial question, Mr. Morgan explained. “[Kosher wine](#), despite its reputation, doesn’t have to be different from any other wine as long as it is handled in the cellar only by Sabbath-observant hands,” he said.

Finding such hands in California wasn’t easy, but Mr. Morgan knew that the Herzog family owned a kosher winery on California’s Central Coast.

He booked a dinner with Nathan Herzog at a kosher restaurant. Halfway through, Mr. Morgan finally found the courage to ask to use the Herzog building and its Orthodox crew. As he made his request, though, he was surprised to find himself beginning to sob, his tears gushing like wine from a cracked barrel.

“I guess there were feelings I didn’t know about,” he said. “I grew up knowing I was Jewish but not really connected to any Jewish tradition.”

He recalled a trip to Jerusalem in his youth: “At the Wailing Wall I saw all these guys praying, and I remember feeling kind of inadequate and sadly disconnected from my heritage. That stayed with me for another 20 years until I started this project.”

From 2003-7, Covenant was made at the Herzog cellar. Mr. Morgan would ship his Napa grapes down the coast, staying a week at a time when he needed to supervise the Orthodox crew.

During these years, Mr. Morgan taught himself Hebrew.

In 2006, he was asked by a niece to read Hebrew at her wedding, since he was the only one in the family who could. Still a beginner, however, he sought the help of the Herzog cellar crew, who the next day took him to practice reading Torah at morning services. There, Mr. Morgan’s halting Hebrew brought a complaint from a member

of the congregation. “Come on, what’s the problem here? I got to get to work!” someone shouted.

Mr. Morgan turned around and replied, “Look, this is the first time I’ve ever done this.”

Surprised, the man said: “Really? Then this is your bar mitzvah!” Out came Scotch, bagels and more tears, as a celebration ensued.

“I arrived at work completely shickered,” Mr. Morgan recalled.

He says the spirit has rubbed off on Mr. Rudd, too, who said via e-mail: “Religion is more of a personal journey for me. I simply wanted to make great wine and felt we could do it, as well as respect the kosher laws.”

Notably, though, Mr. Rudd this year, at great expense, released a kosher-for-[Passover](#) edition of his Distillery No. 209 gin.

In 2007 Mr. Morgan hired a former Herzog cellar worker, Jonathan Hajdu, as a full-time associate winemaker, which allowed him to move his [winemaking](#) home to Napa. Today Covenant’s lone tank and barrels take up a small corner in space rented at a large custom crush plant.

Great precaution is taken so that only Mr. Hajdu handles the wines, which are lavished with the same care as every other top Napa wine. Occasionally a rabbi from the Orthodox Union arrives to inspect the operation.

Mr. Morgan succeeded in making a fine kosher wine. Covenant has earned high scores from critics and found its way onto wine lists at the French Laundry, Per Se and Spago.

But in 2008 Mr. Morgan truly knew he had made it when Mr. Rudd finally offered him some of his finest Napa fruit. That wine, to be called Solomon after Mr. Rudd’s Hebrew name, will be released later this year.