

Some questions to Nachshon Sneh, president of the Rheims Ashkelon ancient vine society.



Could you introduce yourself in a few words?

My name is Nachshon Sneh and I am 67 years old, married, with a son, a daughter and three grandchildren. I was born in Israel and I am a member of Kibbutz Gat, where I live, about 20 km east of the town of Ashkelon.

All my life, I have been used to working on several things at once. I worked in the field of water engineering and irrigation for 45 years, during which I held many positions, and I served on professional committees in the Israel Water Works Association and in regional organizations. I have also always been interested in photography. For 25 years, I served as a volunteer photographer for the Israel Antiquities Authority's southern region. One of the loves of my life is food and wine, a fact that got me involved in research into the vine. I photograph and write about wine-related subjects in Israel and on my travels in Europe, especially in France. I research, photograph and write about the wine industry in Israel in ancient times, and am researching the original local grape

varieties of Israel - the Holy Land.

My love for France and my connection with the country probably began and are related to the date of my birth, June 2nd – the date of the post-revolutionary purge of the Girondists from the Convention by Robespierre – and the Bordeaux region eventually became my second home.

In the 1950's, we grew up in the "beautiful era" – "grand bell époque" of very good relations between Israel and France, with names like: Pierre Mendès France, Guy Mollet, Marcel Dassault and many others.

I am a member of the Order "chaîne des rotisseurs" and of the "ordre mondial des gourmets degustateurs", and an honorary member of the "Baillis de Lalande-de-Pomerol" wine region in Bordeaux.

The origins of my love for archeology and the study of the Land of Israel is also related to France. When I was a young boy, my family lived near the apartment of the French delegation excavating ancient Chalcolithic sites in the Beersheba region, headed by the distinguished and famous French archaeologist, Jean Perrot. This proximity, and the willingness of the French delegation to involve the "curious boy" in all of the mission's activities and discoveries, including a chance to work on an actual archaeological site, gave me a love and passion for the fascinating world of archeology.

I am a member of social organizations, organizations for the quality of government, green environmental groups, nature-preservation organizations and peace organizations.

How did the ancient vine adventure begin for you?

In 1991, as part of my voluntary work as chief photographer for the Israel Antiquities Authority southern region, I was photographing for the archaeological expedition at the "Wine City" in Ashkelon, led by Dr. Yigal Israel. The amazing, varied and unique discoveries at the Ashkelon "Wine City" stirred the imagination of academics and researchers, as well as wine-lovers, reporters and many interested amateurs in Israel.

The discovery of a huge industrial area built to produce wine, and finds of industrial-sized winepresses including a wine-jar industry with all its installations and furnaces, inspired the beginning of a thorough study on the kind of wine jars already known and previously identified as the "Gaza-Ashkelon jar." Many single winepresses continued to be discovered at the time in the Ashkelon and southern region (in smaller concentrations than at Ashkelon's "Wine City"), with associated wine-jug workshops.

There were numerous finds relating to two principal aspects of the ancient wine industry:

1. Winepresses
2. Wine-jug production workshops

In view of these finds, and after much discussion with Dr. Yigal Israel, we concluded that we lacked the third component of the study in order to complete the overall picture of the wine-making industry, namely the raw material – grapes for wine-making, and the grape vines on which they grew. This was the starting point for our research and for our fascinating journey in search of the ancient vine.

You are participating in the research program, what is exactly your mission?

The goals of our research are broad:

1. The continued study of the ancient wine industry with regard to all its aspects:
 - a) Wine-production facilities.
 - b) Production methods.
 - c) The wine-jug production industry.
 - d) Trade and transportation of the wine.
 - e) Studying and collecting any information, of any kind, on the ancient wine industry.
2. Study of 'forgotten' local grape varieties in Ashkelon and the south.
3. A comprehensive study to identify the local grape varieties of the Land of Israel - the Holy Land.
4. Botanical and microbiological study of the vines and grapes.
5. Study of the "Ashkelon Vine" at Rheims
 - a) The history and background of the vine's name.
 - b) Finding the original geographical source of the "Ashkelon Vine" – was the vine brought from Ashkelon to France, or from France to Ashkelon?
6. Domestication - cultivation - planting the 'forgotten' Ashkelon vine in an experimental vineyard with organized professional surveillance.
7. Continuing making wine from 'forgotten' Ashkelon vine grapes, with monitoring and continued analysis of the wine.
8. Examining the possibility of working together with research institutions and local nature and archeology authorities in Israel, to increase awareness of the study.

What do you think we will discover ?

Many goals lie ahead of us in our research. I will mention the main things that we need to discover (at least in the initial research stage):

1. Solving the "Ashkelon Vine" riddle at Rheims - the historical and botanical case.
2. Survey, collection and identification of 'forgotten' grape varieties in Ashkelon and the historic Gaza-Ashkelon region.
3. Final identification of the 'forgotten' vine from the Ashkelon region with black grapes, that were accidentally called "wild grapes" together with all neglected vines.
4. A comprehensive study to identify the local grape varieties of the Land of Israel - the Holy Land.

What is your ultimate goal? Can you explain it?

Our first two main objectives, the first two 'dreams' in our study, are to begin to solve the question – the full historical, geographical and botanical story – of the "Ashkelon Vine" at Rheims, while the second dream is to find an identifying link between the grapes growing around Ashkelon and the botanical remains of the vine and the grapes found in archaeological excavations in the same region, by studying finds preserved by the Israel Antiquities Authority and the academic research institutes, using all the very latest research methods.

This program is also an opportunity for Israel and the Israeli people to develop friendship, cultural and economic exchange between Rheims and Ashkelon, do you share that view?

I view the links between the city of Rheims and the city of Ashkelon as very important. First of all, I see this as strengthening the relationships that are so important between France and Israel. Cooperation between Rheims and Ashkelon in the cultural sciences has actually already started with the declaration of joint research between the two cities, which includes: culture, history, science and heritage. The second aspect (although not necessarily in order of importance) that can be executed immediately, is the subject of tourism in all its forms, with all the benefits that each city can offer its visitors and guests. From the economic aspect, the Chambers of Commerce of the two cities should meet, and I firmly believe that many issues and projects of interest to everyone will be raised, that will each benefit the other side.

Will you be coming to France soon ?

I am already impatient, and full of expectations from my upcoming visit in France. I shall be coming to France this June. I will combine my trip with a visit to the "Vin Expo" fair in Bordeaux, to where I

shall be traveling from Marseilles via a number of important sites and places of interest on the way. From Bordeaux, through the Loire valley, I shall be visiting the city of Rheims, which I am so much looking forward to, in the hopeful expectation that this year there will be a grape harvest of Ashkelon Vine grapes in the courtyard of Rheims Jesuit College. I hope to attend this important event, which is usually held at the beginning of October.

