

At Sunday Dinner, May We Suggest This Divine Wine?

Israeli Grape-Made Brand's Label Features Christ

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The success of the so-called "critter quaffers," the often insipid animal-label wines that saw a huge boom in sales earlier this decade, has a fledgling importer thinking the time has come for a "Lord-and-Savior sipper."



Dinner conversation: A Georgia-based importer is hoping to generate buzz in the Catholic community.

The Grapes of Galilee, a new Israeli wine label aimed at American Christians, launched in the U.S. last week with a label boasting of grapes grown in the region where, as the New Testament tells it, Jesus Christ lived. In fact, the grapes are irrigated with water from the Jordan River, where he was baptized.

The importer -- a Georgia-based Jewish Israeli named Pini Haroz -- says he sees opportunity for his \$14 bottles of chardonnay, merlot and cabernet sauvignon as a holiday or sacramental choice that will be as interesting for its talk value as for its flavors.

'Big talker'

"I'm sure you can buy tastier wine for a better price if you look at the other 60,000 wine labels available in the U.S.," he said. "But this is a wine for special occasions like Christmas dinner. It will be a big talker."

Sort of like all those cute bottles adorned with moose, monkeys and penguins that took hold a few years back, except with Jesus?

"Yes, like that."

As Mr. Haroz tells it, credit for the idea to market Israeli wine to Christians goes to his 20-year-old son, Adam, who noticed a market for bottled "holy water" from the Jordan on a recent trip to Israel.

Galilee has long been a major wine-producing area in Israel, and many of its vineyards are irrigated by the Jordan River, two facts that haven't mattered much to the Jewish consumers who buy the bulk of imported Israeli wine in the U.S.

But the Haroz clan is wagering those attributes will matter more to Christians. They cut a deal with an existing Israeli winery to slap a label that could pass for a Sunday-school-textbook cover on the same bottles of cabernet, merlot and chardonnay it was already producing. (The label features images of Jesus being baptized and walking on water.)

Courting Catholics

The wine will be marketed in the areas of the U.S. with the highest concentrations of Catholics, Mr. Haroz said, and primarily advertised through religious print publications such as Catholic Digest, God's Word Today and Today's Parish Minister.

The Grapes of Galilee would do well to match the fast-growing sales of the fledgling Israeli wine sector in the U.S. According to ACNielsen, dollar sales of Israeli table wine grew 14.4% during the 52 weeks ending August 25, compared with 6.7% for imported table wines as a whole. Total sales of imported Israeli table wine at drug, food and liquor stores last year were about \$1.2 million.

And there's plenty of room to grow: Israeli wines account for 0.05% of the U.S. import wine market