With its classic Mediterranean climate and venerable history, the Galilee offers many attractions for the body and the soul. Visitors to this narrow swath of land tucked in between the Mediterranean and the Sea of Galilee will find plenty to experience, including a burgeoning wine scene.

A two-hour drive north from Tel Aviv, the Galilee provides a good introduction to northern Israel’s wine country and its distinctive cuisine. Passing the hills of Nazareth, the road traverses rolling, wooded countryside, olive groves and pastures, before descending 600 feet below sea level to the azure Sea of Galilee.

Fishermen still ply its waters as in biblical times, and on the hills above, locals herd flocks and press olives and grapes. But nowadays the olive oil is artisanal extra-virgin, the goat and sheep cheeses are crafted in boutique creameries, and the wines attest to how local vintners are parlaying the region’s terroir with increasingly sophisticated winemaking styles.

The town of Rosh Pina in the Galilee region is a historic settlement and makes a fine base for exploring the region’s many diversions.
Nestled in the Canaan hills, the picturesque, historic town of Rosh Pina makes an ideal base for exploring the region. Established in the 1880s under the patronage of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, the town’s first settlers withstood malaria and attacks from hostile neighbors to eke out a living from agriculture. Today, Rosh Pina’s economy is tourism-based, and a tranquil, old-world atmosphere pervades the restored 19th-century settlement, where many of the original stone structures have been renovated into craft galleries, restaurants, a convivial wine bar, and a host of bed-and-breakfasts.

Galilee cuisine is rooted in fresh local ingredients, and the Muscat Restaurant at the Mitzpe Hayanim Hotel in Rosh Pina, with its rustic elegance and panoramic sea views, is a fine place to make its acquaintance. Chef Haim Tibi’s menus draw from the hotel’s organic vegetable and livestock farm, interpreted through the culinary traditions of this culturally diverse region (he counts local Arab, Moroccan, Hungarian, Tunisian and Lebanese cuisines as sources of inspiration). From his culinary backyard, Tibi gleans wild chicory for the salad that accompanies his excellent house-produced veal sausages, pomegranates for the caramel sauce to complement breast of duck, and pine nut oil as a foil for the earthy roast eggplant with tehina.

Visiting the region’s many wineries, tucked into agricultural settlements or industrial parks, will probably require advance planning and some local assistance with the help of hoteliers and innkeepers. But distances are short, and the views of Mount Meron and the Hula Valley are spectacular. English is almost universally spoken, and most road signs are translated into English as well.

Note: When calling the following establishments from North America, dial 011, then the telephone number. When calling from within Israel, dial a 0 in place of the 972 prefix. Prices have been converted to U.S. dollars using the exchange rate at press time ($1 = 3.59 Israeli shekels) and have been rounded to the nearest dollar. Tipping of 10 percent to 15 percent is customary.

WHERE TO EAT

Diana
51 Paulus the 6th, Nazareth

Telephone (972) 57-750-7442
Open Daily, noon to midnight
Cost Entrées $20–$35
Credit cards All major

Seasonal greens and velvety tehina appear in different configurations in the copious mezze of salads served at this bastion of authentic Galilee Arab cuisine, located at the entrance to Nazareth’s old city. A saber-wielding cook reduces a mound of lamb and spices to mince-meat in front of your eyes to produce the house-special kebabs, which are handsomely matched by two perfectly charcoal grilled lamb ribs.

A dessert of pan-browned noodle threads served over warm goat cheese and soaked in syrup may sound strange, but Chef Duhoul Safadi’s version of this local delicacy, called knaffe, is delicious. Solid choices from the short but stylish wine list include an Alexander the Great Cabernet ($68) and Castel’s “C” Chardonnay ($50). Nonkosher.

Gan Eden
Har Canaan, Safed (Tsfat)
Telephone (972) 57-756-9625
Open Breakfast, lunch and dinner, Sunday to Thursday; open until dusk on Friday
Cost Entrées $15–$25
Credit cards Visa, MasterCard, Diners Club

Situated in a 100-year-old stone home in the Canaan Mountain neighborhood of Safed, the atmosphere in Gan Eden is so pleasantly domestic that you’d think someone’s mother was in the kitchen instead of Chef Rafi Prigel fixing each dish. In fact, Prigel and his wife make everything from the pasta to the breads to the desserts, and all ingredients are Galilee-local. Pan-browned fish kebabs made of delicately seasoned minced white sea fish are accompanied by a cranberry-studded quinoa salad. The restaurant’s butter-drenched calzones look more like ravioli, and are filled with the firm salty goat cheese for which Safed is famous. The perfunctory wine list centers around half bottles from the Golan Heights’ mid-range Gamla series ($18). Kosher/Dairy.

Uri Buri
Lighthouse Square, Old City, Acre (‘Akko)
Telephone (972) 4-955-2212
Open Lunch and dinner, daily
Cost Entrées $25–$35
Credit cards All major

The ancient Mediterranean port city of Acre (‘Akko) makes for a worthwhile day trip, with its Ottoman-era citadel built on the foundations of a subterranean Crusader city, and massive stone ramparts overlooking the sea. Not to be missed is a meal at this cozy, informal waterfront restaurant with some of the best seafood in Israel. Presided over by Chef Uri Yirmias, the restaurant offers a standard tasting menu, and dishes of the day may include Asian-inspired calamari and shrimp with Israeli couscous and fresh snowpeas, Spanish mackerel in red pepper-spiked lemon-garlic sauce, and the palate-uplifting homemade arak and almond sorbet. From the short but moderately priced, Israeli-only wine list, Uri recommends the Bravdo Merlot ($50) and the Pelter Sauvignon Blanc ($32). Reservations are required on Fridays and Saturdays. Nonkosher.

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WHERE TO STAY

Mitzpe Hayamim Hotel and Spa
89 Safed Road, Rosh Pina  Telephone (972) 4-699-4555  Web site www.mitzpe-hayamim.com  Rooms 50  Suites 41  Rates $380–$1,150

Built in the 1920s as a sanatorium, the only Relais & Châteaux hotel in Israel is nestled in a verdant garden setting, with expansive views of the Sea of Galilee. Casually elegant, the hotel extends across several buildings. Try to secure one of the suites with a wraparound porch in the main Bauhaus estate.

This is an ideal place to take in the fresh air, sip herbal tea, dip into the delightfully eclectic vegetarian buffet and indulge in a spa treatment or two. Walking trails cross through sprawling organic gardens and orchards, and pass by the barns on the hotel grounds that house the vegetarian dining room and the Muscat Restaurant (nonkosher).

The Scots Hotel
1 Gdud Barak St., Tiberias  Telephone (972) 4-671-0710  Web site www.scotshotels.co.il  Rooms 69  Rates $350–$750

Scruffy, urban Tiberias lacks the charm of Rosh Pina, but if this lakeside city is to be your base, the Scots Hotel is the place to stay. Built as a hospital by a Scottish medical mission in the 1890s, the original basalt stone buildings have been meticulously renovated and the hotel, owned and operated by the Church of Scotland, extends a gracious, nondenominational welcome.

Most of the rooms are in a new annex, but the 19 rooms in the two historic buildings are particularly capacious, comfortable and tastefully designed (try for one of the sea-facing rooms in the Doctor’s House). The mellow Ceilidh Bar off the hotel lobby has a fittingly broad selection of Scotch whiskies, and a vaulted stone basement has been transformed into a wine cellar, focusing on bottles from the Galilee and Golan Heights but with a Château Mouton-Rothschild 2002 ($680) ready for celebrating that special occasion. The Scots Hotel is nonsmoking and nonkosher.

Villa Tehila
7 Hahalutzim St., Rosh Pina  Telephone (972) 4-693-5336  Web site www.villa-tehila.co.il  Rooms 11  Rates From $120 a night

This pretty and relaxing inn located in the heart of Rosh Pina features expansive views of the surrounding countryside, a cobblestone courtyard and heated swimming pool. Ideal for families, the theme is Israeli modern rustic, with brightly painted antiques and comfortable four-poster beds. While there is a relaxed common area for tea and coffee, you’ll have to order ahead for a filling Israeli breakfast made by local kibbutzniks.

Villa Tehila is quiet and peaceful, except for the occasional braying of ponies that Madame Tehila has stabled on the property, and the lovebirds and parakeets she keeps as well. It’s within easy walking distance to local amenities, including the Chocolat coffee and dessert bar (with free Wi-Fi) and Rafa’s restaurant, which offers hearty casseroles and meat dishes.

WINERIES TO VISIT

Chateau Golan Winery
Moshav Eliad, Golan Heights  Telephone (972) 4-660-0026  Web site www.chateaugolan.com

Located at the southern end of the Golan lies this small estate-style winery, with a pretty garden and showcase vineyard. Future plans include extensive wine and culinary seminars. Visits by appointment.

Galil Mountain Winery
Kibbutz Yiron, Upper Galilee  Telephone (972) 4-686-8740  Web site www.galilmountain.co.il  Open Sunday to Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

This sleek, modern winery lies near the Lebanese border within a craggy, mountainous terrain that is home to some of the region’s best vineyards. The winery was designed to provide views of the surrounding landscape, as well as its winemaking facilities.

Golan Heights Winery
Katzrin, Golan Heights  Telephone (972) 4-696-8409  Open Sunday to Thursday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.  Web site www.yarden.com

This is one of Israel’s biggest and best wineries, and a driving force in its modern wine industry. The winery has a large and professionally managed visitor’s center, and one-hour tours are available. Call in advance.

Abbie Rosner is a freelance writer based in the Galilee.