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[Return to Views & tastes index](#) [Return to Grape home page](#)

The art of blending 25 March 2007

And there's something oddly like a coffin in the Vilafonté cellar too, says Angela Lloyd

Deconstruction of well-known dishes, where the individual parts are presented on the plate in different forms, is a regrettable fad among chefs. Deconstruction of a quality red wine, on the other hand, offers a far more useful experience and illustrates the art of blending.

A recent tasting with Zelma Long of some of the component wines in the Vilafonté Series C and Series M blends eloquently revealed the skills required both in initial vinification and oak maturation as well as in assembling the blend in the desired style with consistency.

Long and her viticulturist husband, Phil Freese have just completed their fifth harvest from their methodically planted Paarl vineyards and the first in their new, custom-built Stellenbosch cellar. While Long acknowledges the process of getting to know their vineyards is underway, it is a journey rather than a destination. She relates how this year, 'an unusual phenomenon was finding seeds brown before the rest of the grape was ripe.'

Each block is vinified separately according to its own needs, although experiments are still very much the order of the day. For instance, new large, oak barrels as well as stainless steel tanks are now used for fermentation. Which blocks will be vinified in these wooden fermenters, and the details of how to proceed, are still being decided. Each vineyard block is initially oak-matured separately with a basic assemblage made

after a year; this blend is returned to oak for approximately three months. Only malbec and merlot are transferred to tank to preserve their fruit.

The two wines are distinct in style rather than a flagship and second label. As Long puts it, 'Series M is the merlot approach, Series C the cabernet approach'. Both have potential, but the former is more approachable.

All the parts

There are six varietal components from 2006 lined up. We begin with two merlots. The first is fresh and fruity, nice acid, well integrated oak (only second-fill barrels used) and a persistent fruity finish; very approachable. The second is an altogether bigger more powerful wine, with obvious toasty oak and rich viscosity, though it still manages elegance. Pretty confidently I guess the former goes into Series M, the latter Series C. Wrong on both counts! Lesson one: a more approachable style needs some serious structure, even if it isn't obvious; conversely, a restrained, big wine that will benefit from ageing also needs fruity elements for balance and to avoid being monolithic.



Zelma Long working on the Vilafonté blend with venture partners Mike Ratcliffe and Phil Freese

The juicy malbec is easier to get right. 'We're looking for flesh in the M', agrees Long. She admits some unusually grainy tannins come from over-extraction, a factor which resident winemaker Bernard le Roux says is possibly due to the notorious 2006 power cuts. This extraction defect has been corrected in 2007.

No such problems with the excellent cabernet franc with its tantalising spice, silky yet light texture, and very fine tannins; a focused wine that could easily stand on its own but will add dimension and class to C. A duo of cabernet sauvignons concludes the 2006s. I find it difficult to decide what I think about the first one: on the plus side it shows pure cabernet blackcurrant fruit and has good viscosity; less attractive are a touch of sweetness and a finishing push of oak. Quite simply, the wine doesn't yet hang together. No problem, it has time and might end up in M or C; this block does vary from year to year. Cabernet sample two is much more consistent, 'a regular part of C', confirms Long, which is no surprise. The wine is rich, dark-fruited but closed, with assertive grape tannins from the moment it hits the taste buds and exceptionally persistent. It absorbs 100 percent new oak with ease.

We reach the final 2005 wines via a 2007 version of the second merlot, just dry and off the skins, though still with a pomace/grappa like character (Bernard le Roux assures it's nothing to do with the Dalla Cia grappa distillery next door!).

Vintage 2005

I have tasted the Vilafonté wines for Platter since the maiden 2003 vintage. The 2005s, bottled in January so still settling down, show much clearer style definition and better tannin integration than the original pair. Delicious fresh, ripe fruit is layered on Series M's confidently firm backbone. New oak is kept to a complementary and judicious 40 percent. By contrast, C's flavour richness is firmly contained by ripe yet still impenetrable tannins. A beautifully focused wine, well able to handle 90 percent new oak. Both very much more than the sum of their parts.



Oh, the coffin! This ingenious, stainless steel structure, which really does resemble a semi-open coffin on wheels, was designed and constructed especially for Vilafonté. Its purpose is twofold. Firstly, it is used to deposit the de-stemmed and crushed grapes into the fermentation tanks and secondly, it is used to transport wine from the bottom of the tank and pour it over the cap at the top, all with the idea of avoiding the use of pumps. A forklift serves as the raising agent. At the 'head' end, there is both a pipe outlet and a curved edge from where wine and grapes are run off and tipped out, the latter guided by a strategically placed stainless steel semi-circle resting on the open-topped tank.

A slow but effective operation. But where quality is all, necessity is truly the mother of invention!

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