



Dear Wine Lover,

US journal *Wine Spectator* has just released its annual list of the top 100 wines of 2004. In the past 12 months, its editors tasted more than 12 500 wines from all over the world. Of these, some 3 100 rated outstanding, scoring 90 points or higher on the magazine's 100-point scale. These were the initial candidates for the Top 100 list.



The final selections were then determined by evaluating each wine on four criteria: quality (as represented by score); value (as reflected by release price); availability (measured by case production or, for international wines, by the number of cases imported); and an X-factor representing excitement.

Four South African wines made it on to this year's final list, these being in 21st place the Glen Carlou Chardonnay 2002, 59th was Charles Back's Goat-Roti 2002, 71st was Warwick Three Cape Ladies 2001 and 88th was Kanonkop Paul Sauer 2000.

Michael Ratcliffe, managing director of Stellenbosch farm Warwick, thinks that the US is soon set to overtake the UK in importance as an export market for local producers and is concentrating his efforts in establishing Warwick's reputation in that country. He places great store in the influence wielded by *Wine Spectator* when it comes to determining sales so must be chuffed that his Pinotage blend cracked the nod.

Ratcliffe thinks *Wine Spectator*'s four judging criteria of quality, value, availability and the X-factor offer the foundations of just about the ultimate marketing strategy. He points out that quality, value and availability are all tangible matters that the producer has relative control over, while the X-factor is something less easily manageable.

The X-factor is certainly a concept to conjure with. Ratcliffe equates it to "creating a buzz" or conveying the personalities involved in making the wine and the history behind it in a compelling manner. The suspicion might be that the challenge for the producer seeking an endorsement from *Wine Spectator* becomes simply one of getting on the right side of editor and publisher Marvin Shanken. Nevertheless, as the fine wine market becomes ever more over-traded, some kind of profile in a magazine like *Wine Spectator* must be seen as useful to the consumer trying to make a purchasing decision.

Significantly, Ratcliffe has embarked on a project separate to Warwick with the specific intention of making a dent at the top end of the US market. He has teamed up with high-profile husband-and-wife winemaking team Phil Freese and Zelma Long out of California. Freese was formerly vice-president of wine-growing at Robert Mondavi winery in Napa and has consulted to top wineries both in California and here. Long was chief winemaker at Mondavi and then winemaker and CEO of the prestigious Simi Winery in Sonoma and currently does consultancy work around the world. A more heavyweight partnership to embark on the creation of X-factor wines is difficult to imagine.

A 43ha plot was secured on the Simonsvlei Road in Paarl, and viticulturist Freese began planting over 1998 and 1999. The project goes by the very Californian sounding name of Vilafonté, which happens to be a corruption of Vilafontes, a soil-type appearing in the vineyard. A clever way of getting around any latent prejudice that some international tasters still seem to have towards South African wine.

To date, only 12ha of vineyard exist, because not enough different clonal material has been available while there were also doubts about some of the health status of the vines on offer. Planting is particularly dense with some 5 200 vines per hectare compared to an industry average of 2 500 vines per hectare - this done in an effort to improve flavour concentration of the fruit being produced. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Malbec went in, the intention being to make Bordeaux-style red. Freese comments, "I've always wanted a vineyard with this configuration. I feel like a kid in a candystore".

First release set for the US in summer 2005 will be from the 2003 vintage, and features two wines: the soft and sumptuous Series M and the deeper, more powerful Series C. The first wine contains 41% Merlot, 39% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Malbec and 4% Cabernet Franc, while the second is 82% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc and 2% Malbec.

Long is particularly pleased with the "tremendous amount of fruit" that both wines display, and says she was at pains not to "overlay" this with wood. Both spent 18 months in barrel, the Series M being exposed to a mere 20% new oak, while the Series C got slightly more with 50% new oak being used. Interestingly, neither of the wines feature added acid, which further attests to the quality of the fruit.

Freese and Long point out that the names are entirely utilitarian and do not refer to the main constituents in the respective blends. "It's perfectly possible that one vintage could see the Series C made with a majority of Merlot," says Long. Also smart giving your wines names that aren't difficult to pronounce if you're trying to win over *Wine Spectator* editors.

Both wines are available in fairly large quantities (with 1 840 12-bottle cases of the Series M and 1 388 12-bottle cases of the Series C having been made). It bears remembering that generous production helps get on that *Wine Spectator* top 100 list and Ratcliffe comments that it is his ambition to eventually get to a combined production of 10 000 cases.

Where Vilafonté might not impress the *Wine Spectator* judges so much is that both wines are to carry price tags that place them firmly in the luxury category: the Series M set to sell at \$40 and the Series C at \$70 a bottle in the US. Ratcliffe is unashamed that 60% to 70% of production will be allocated over there, while a mere 100 to 150 cases altogether will stay in South Africa, where the Series M will sell for "R200 plus" a bottle and the Series C at "R300 plus" a bottle. Ratcliffe clearly believes that prestige pricing will outweigh value (affordability) in generating excitement about these wines.

At no point during the presentation of the new Vilafonté wines did anybody associated with the project suggest that their efforts might obtain icon status but you have a sense that this is what they are ultimately aiming for. Most would agree that in order for any wine to be viewed as an icon this has to be earned over time. However, when you consider the collective expertise involved in the Vilafonté venture, icon status just might be attainable.

Long reckons that particularly the Series C has the balance and fruit concentration to improve for 20 years, stabilize for 20 years and then start a gradual decline. Buy some of the maiden release, drink it in 40 years time at its peak, and you stand the chance of experiencing what at least *Wine Spectator* will have come to see as one of the best wines in the world.

Cheers
Christian Eedes

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