

## A mixed case of potential icons

08 June 2005 by [Kim Maxwell](#)

Two more top-end South African wines were launched recently. Using local and overseas prices as a guide, plus relevant international ratings and allocations, **Kim Maxwell** takes an in-depth look at how South Africa's potential icons are shaping up.

Californian winemaking consultant Zelma Long, in her April 2001 address at the Nederburg Auction, told local producers to support, applaud and even promote top South African wines. In Long's view, SA wines selling well internationally, even in small quantities or at high prices, spell 'success' for everyone.

Four years later, Long is involved in the first South African-American wine joint venture. Vilafonté is the collaboration between winemaker Long, her viticulturist husband Phil Freese, Warwick Estate's Mike Ratcliffe, and US importer Bartholomew Broadbent. The two blends are Vilafonté Series M and Vilafonté Series C, both from Paarl grapes. The maiden 2003 vintage has a total production of 2300 12-bottle cases.

Selling for £30 and £40 respectively in the UK, the M and C are billed as icon wines. 'Our vision is to produce wines that are at least as good as the best in the world. We want to be accepted as one of the world's more significant wineries,' reads the vision statement. Ratcliffe says the current wines are only the starting point; they expect a quality leap within 10 years.

Back from their first US and Canadian market release (the official US launch is July 2005), Ratcliffe reports that Series M will sell at US\$50; Series C at US\$70. 'What's relevant is that we're going into the US with significant volumes of top-quality wine,' he adds.

While the US is Vilafonté's main volume focus, Ratcliffe is pleased with response in the significant Swedish market. 'We've had feedback about a favourable rating by Per Bill in Systembolaget's magazine. They've taken 60 cases each of Series C and M,' he reports. In South Africa, only 100 cases are available - Series M at over R200 per bottle; Series C at over R300 per bottle - from specialist wine stores, restaurants and lodges.

Vergelegen's V 2001 Bordeaux blend had its UK and local launches with similar fanfare. Retailing for £55 and US\$120 respectively, in South Africa a

1200-bottle allocation is going at R600 a pop. Winemaker André van Rensburg confirms the wine is available from the cellar, but warns not to expect taste tests before purchases.

To say he's pleased with the wine - 5000 bottles or 830 six-bottle cases - is an understatement. 'This is our moonwalk. It may be a small step for Vergelegen, but hopefully it's a giant leap for South African wine - in terms of quality, price point and importantly, the country's positioning. We don't mean that in an arrogant way. Mbeki claims this is the century of Africa's Renaissance. Why not start with high-quality agriculture? We have to change overseas perceptions of low-price value-for-money South African wines,' says Van Rensburg.

Yet with the UK, Scandinavian, German and Dutch allocations already snapped up and glowing UK media tributes to boot, some arrogance, albeit justified, has crept in. 'Vergelegen has assumed its position as a top quality producer in the world of wine. We may be the first to launch a top-end South African wine, but we won't be the last,' he concludes.

They're not the first actually; Van Rensburg's blinkered vision aside. Does anyone remember KWV's Perold 1996, launched a few years back at US\$100? We don't see the wine often in 'iconic' tasting line-ups, yet KWV assures that all 6000 bottles - and the second 2002 release of Perold 1998 from the same Shiraz vineyard - instantly sell out in six key international markets. 'It's a marketing decision not to submit Perold for competition ratings. The fact that we can't keep up with demand speaks for itself,' says spokesperson Penelope Horwood. The next release is in six months time, also at US\$100 per bottle. Local sales - at approximately R850 - will only be from KWV's Wine Emporium.

So what else is in the potential South African icon line-up, if high prices, consistency, overseas reputation and potential ageability are the measures?

Tim Atkin was rather excited about the maiden De Toren Fusion V 1999 in *The Observer* of April 2002, describing it as 'one of the best reds' he'd ever tasted from the Cape. 'Close your eyes and you could be drinking a top Bordeaux - but at half the price' he said then of a £14.99 (R85 ex-cellar) wine. American critic Robert Parker gave the same vintage 90 points - an unprecedented step for a maiden vintage from SA, says winemaker Albie Koch. American Wine Spectator gave the 2000 and 2001 vintages 91 points. The current 2002 De Toren Fusion V sells at R195 ex-cellar (R200 retail), £23 and US\$37.

Morgenster's flagship Morgenster 2001 blend was eventually launched in

March 2004 - at R260 ex-cellar and around US\$48. With Château Cheval-Blanc's Pierre Lurton punting a terroir-driven approach in his consulting, they didn't want to rush the young vineyards. Winemaker Marius Lategan reports that Stephen Tanzer, heavyweight critic in the US and Canada, gave Morgenster's maiden vintage 91+ points (their Lourens River Valley 2001 scored 90 points). Lategan is anxiously awaiting Mr Parker's score now - he's apparently tasted the wine but no ratings have been released. There is no Morgenster 2002, and 2003 will be released in mid-2006.

The 'Rust en Vrede Estate' wine was on a good US wicket too after Wine Spectator selected the 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2000 vintages for their annual 'Top 100 Wines' in the world listings. The 2000 also scored 92 points. But continued success is no longer certain, thanks to family feuding and winemaker Louis Strydom jumping to the Engelbrecht Els winery.

There, the maiden Ernie Els 2000 launched at R400 ex-cellar/retail locally and at \$65 in the US, surely helped by a 93 point Wine Spectator score (the 2001 scored the same). The current Ernie Els 2002 sells for R500, US\$70 and £40 - notching only 91 points in Wine Spectator.

Van Rensburg didn't make a Vergelegen V 2002 because he's 'only bottling in exceptional vintages'. He concedes that other 'perhaps even better' South African wines could still be launched, welcoming them if they change 'big picture' perceptions of South African wine as a category.

Vergelegen's V is an excellent wine, yet the small picture inference from its local launch, is that current competitors aren't on a par. With V, Van Rensburg produces half the bottles of the average First Growth Bordeaux top label - the same goes for KWV's Perold - and he's critical of their volumes.

Yet, if top South African wines are to make it on the world stage, I'm more inclined towards Long's approach. Significant volumes ensure Vilafonté's availability on more American and European dining tables, with South African brand power behind it. Otherwise, South African producers might have to start marketing a mixed case of icons to keep up.