

A Winemaker, Transplanted

"Just right for Merlot: South Africa's cool climate and low rainfall favor the grapes in Zelma Long's vineyard near Cape Town."

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

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ZELMA LONG has cut a broad swath through the California wine world for a quarter-century and more. Soon she will see whether her widely acknowledged expertise as a winemaker will enable her to do the same thing in this country's heart-stoppingly beautiful Cape vineyards, more than 10,000 miles from the Napa Valley.

"This place is made for fine wines," Ms. Long told me over a lunch of calamari and shredded oxtails in saffron cream sauce at Tokara, the winery where her new wines will be made for the next few years. "It has all the advantages of soil and climate you could want, plus a viticultural tradition stretching back many centuries."

Ms. Long and her husband, Phil Freese, a leading authority on the planting and cultivation of vines, will introduce two cutting-edge blends bearing the Vilafonté label to the South African and American markets later this year: an "M" series, mainly merlot and malbec, and a "C" series, mostly cabernet sauvignon. The prices will be hefty: \$50 and \$70 a bottle respectively, on a level with California's classic reds.

With the globalization of the wine trade, French and Australian and a few Italian winemakers have taken on consulting jobs around the world. "Flying winemakers," they are called, because they flit from country to country. But Ms. Long and Mr. Freese intend to play a role more sustained than that. She said that she planned "to be as hands-on as I can possibly be," spending three to four months here every year.

Although some local growers privately expressed skepticism that Ms. Long would find her American experience quickly applicable in this country, and others predicted that her prices would prove too high, John Platter, a prominent South African wine writer, said that so far Ms. Long and Mr. Freese had been warmly welcomed by their peers.

"There's no sense at all that they're interlopers," he added, "because they've been coming here for such a long time."

Now 61, Ms. Long was one of the first women to study for a master's degree in oenology at the University of California, Davis, the top wine school in the United States. She honed her craft under Mike Grgich at Robert Mondavi's vineyards, later serving there as chief winemaker for almost a decade. In 1979, she shifted to the Sonoma Valley, scoring a notable triumph at Simi Winery, which she restored to its former eminence before stepping down as president and chief executive in 1999.

For the last 28 years, she has also owned Long Vineyards in the hills east of the Napa Valley with her first husband, Bob Long, turning out rich and very long-lived chardonnays in the European style, as well as several other superb wines. That, too, helped to establish her as the most important woman in American wine, a trailblazer who helped open the door for later stars like Helen Turley and Cathy Corison.

A rangy woman who looks a lot taller than her 5 feet 8½ inches, Ms. Long is a bluejeans-and-khakis, plain-talking type who seems equally at home in the vineyard, the boardroom and the barrel room.

She and Mr. Freese own 50 percent of Vilafonté; the other 50 percent belongs to Michael Ratcliffe, scion of the family that has operated the highly regarded Warwick Estate in nearby Stellenbosch for more than four decades. The founder of a group of young and progressive winemakers called Rootstock, he will oversee Vilafonté's operations when Ms. Long is out of the country.

A fourth major player at Vilafonté, the San Francisco-based wine merchant Bartholomew Broadbent, has an equally impressive pedigree: he is the son of Michael Broadbent, the celebrated London wine auctioneer and commentator. He will import Vilafonté wines to North America.

Vilafonté's initial production, the 2001 and 2002 vintages, was privately bottled; now comes the big test, the 2003, which was bottled last January at Tokara, a showplace hillside winery outside Stellenbosch. It will reach stores sometime this autumn. An initial tasting of both the "M" and "C" series showed great promise, the "M" suppler and fruitier, the "C" more commanding.

The two demonstrate what modern techniques and liberation from bureaucratic shackles have done for the best new South African wines. Stale, musty flavors and ham-handed heaviness have been supplanted by clarity, subtlety and finesse.

Attracted first to South Africa by Gyles Webb, the Indiana-educated pioneer who made some of this country's first and best modern wines at Thelema, Ms. Long paid her initial visit in 1990 and returned in 2001 to make a speech "defining the unique position that I believe South Africa can build for itself" in world wine markets.

It came at an apt time. The country and its winemakers were just emerging from the long, dark tunnel called apartheid, which not only stunted the sales of South African wines in many foreign markets but also blocked the importation of virus-free clones. Ms. Long gave her audience every reason to be confident about the future.

She noted the country's "enormously old and diverse soils," which support more than 8,000 species of often vividly flowering plants, including the magnificent proteas. As a result, she continued, "along with California, South Africa has more potential for varietal diversity in a relatively small area than any wine-growing country in the world." It also benefits from coastal fogs rolling in from the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, which converge at South Africa's southwestern tip, near the main winefields.

A relatively cool climate, low rainfall and moderate humidity, Ms. Long argued, "give wines that have personality and flavor length" without the aggressive tannins that mar reds in some growing zones.

Since then, dozens of South African wines have achieved world-class quality, and many others stand on the verge of excellence. Far-flung new wine areas like Swartland and Walker Bay are thriving. My friend Anthony Hamilton Russell's pioneering Hamilton Russell vineyard, situated above Walker Bay in the well-named Hemel-en-Aarde ("Heaven on Earth") valley, makes superlative pinot noir, as does Bouchard Finlayson. New varieties like mourvèdre, shiraz, viognier, riesling and sémillon (new to South Africa, that is) have been more extensively planted, and chenin blanc is staging a comeback.

In addition, a few black South Africans are slowly moving into ownership and management positions in the wine industry --- far too slowly, many complain, but at least the transformation is under way.

Vilafonté was laid out in 1998 and 1999 in a shallow bowl on the northern slope of the Simonsberg, one of the stark peaks that lend the Cape region such drama. It was planted with classic Bordeaux varietals, including cabernet sauvignon, malbec, cabernet franc and merlot, using global positioning satellite data to establish vine rows in harmony with sun and drainage patterns.

Mr. Freese, who holds advanced degrees from Davis, also uses a technique that he developed while working at Mondavi, called the Normalized Differentiated Vegetative Index, to monitor the plants' vigor. With the aid of aerial photos taken by a special camera at particular wavelengths, the index helps to pinpoint weaker vines and to detect any early symptoms of the infestation by phylloxera lice that is fatal to vines.

Ms. Long told me there were no plans to build a winery for now. By 2007, she and her husband hope to have found and converted a building for such use, with a built-to-order facility to follow later if the economic climate makes it practical.

About 30 acres have been planted so far, with a potential for 50 more on the same property. The present 30 produced 1,700 cases of "M" and 1,300 cases of "C" in the 2003 vintage. When fully planted, the vineyard will produce 15,000 to 18,000 cases, which is a fair-to-middling total, certainly well outside the boutique range.

Ms. Long grew up in the Pacific Northwest and graduated from Oregon State University. She is especially attracted to the wines from the Walla Walla district in southeastern Washington, a few miles north of the Oregon border, most of all the merlots made there, which she said she considers some of the best in the world.

Those merlots - powerful, well-structured wines with big, soft tannins rather than the lightweights often made elsewhere - bear a strong resemblance to those being produced by some South African wineries. Vilafonté intends to join them.

A bit later, Ms. Long said, she and Mr. Freese also plan to "take another look at pinotage." That grape, uniquely South African, resulted from a crossing in the 1920's of cinsaut and pinot noir. Wines made from it are sometimes coarse, with an unpleasant aftertaste, but winemakers at vineyards like Kanonkop and other estates near Vilafonté's property have been producing well-oaked pinotage with a fruity aroma.

Under the umbrella of Zelphi, their new company, Ms. Long and Mr. Freese have kept busy as consultants, working with clients in South Africa, Washington State (Abeja), California (Gundlach-Bundschu) and Israel (Golan Heights Winery).

But they have been less successful in their own small-scale projects abroad. Simunye, their initial South African effort, a joint venture with Michael Back of Backsberg, also in Paarl, foundered because of disagreements among the partners. It was discontinued a few years ago.

In Germany's Nahe Valley, through which flows a small tributary of the Rhine, the two teamed with Monika Christmann, a leading German wine educator and writer, to produce a riesling that they called Sibyl. From the first vintage in 1998 it attracted highly favorable comment, but with Germany's depressed wine prices, Sibyl was not big enough (four and a half acres, 450 to 900 cases a year, depending on the harvest) to prosper.

"It cost much too much to market the wine," Ms. Long said, "so we have just closed the whole operation down."

All of which serves as a reminder that even for people as obviously talented and widely experienced as Ms. Long and Mr. Freese, there are plenty of pitfalls in starting new ventures in far-off winelands.