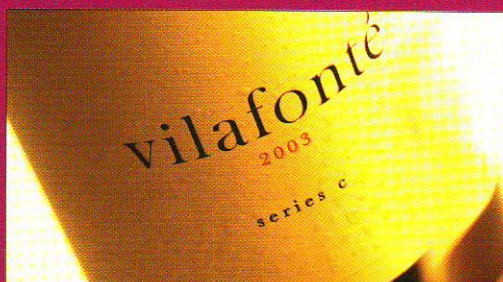


SPOTLIGHT ON... SOUTH AFRICA



Perhaps it's a sign of maturity. Certainly it signals a positive self-image and some tangible self-belief. Within a month, three South African wines have been launched clearly targeting the ultra-premium, luxury sector. The first, the modestly-titled V from Vergelegen, came into being precisely because MD Don Tooth wanted to prove that South Africa's 'cheap and cheerful' image was nothing if not short-sighted. V is a serious Cabernet-dominated Bordeaux blend and will retail at about £55 a bottle, with the UK receiving a third of the 25-barrels worth of wine produced (Paragon).

The other two wines are, if anything, more tantalising prospects due to their mixed parentage. Vilafonté, the first American and South African joint winemaking venture, brings together the creative forces of Zelma Long (award-winning winemaker, ex-Mondavi and Simi), Dr Philip Freese (vineyard manager, ex-Mondavi, consultant to various leading California and South African wineries), and Mike Ratcliffe (project manager, MD Warwick Estate).

At the UK launch in late May, the trio were on hand to explain in detail every aspect of their approach – from viticulture and vinification to market positioning – to what looks like a great new venture and a brace of iconic wines. 'It is our deeply-held belief,' said Ratcliffe, 'that South Africa can produce wines that are at minimum as good as anything in the world,' a claim supported by Freese who enthused about the near ideal climatic conditions and soil being 'about as good as it gets for growing vines.' Zelma Long described South African positioning as somewhere between the Old World and the New, and this was born out in the wines which marry soft tannins and generosity of fruit, though not overly forward or fleshy, with refined elegance. Clearly the country has the tools at its disposal to produce very fine wines indeed.

Series M, retailing at £30, is soft, intense and seductive, roughly two-thirds Merlot and Malbec, with the balance being Cabernet Sauvignon and, in some years, Cabernet Franc. Series C, retailing at £40, is bold, powerful and expressive with a classic backbone of Cabernet Sauvignon, with Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Malbec playing support roles. Available through Louis Latour Ltd.