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Vilafonté

by Tom Cannavan

Mike Ratcliffe, managing director of Warwick Estate in Stellenbosch, had no plans to become involved in a joint venture until one fateful day when he got chatting to a wine grower called Phil Freese. Former head of vine growing for Robert Mondavi, Freese was working as a consultant in South Africa for some big names like Rustenberg, Thelema and Warwick. He had also been looking after a 42ha vineyard in the Paarl region called Vilafonté.

A plan began to take shape whereby they would acquire the Vilafonté vineyard, which Freese believed to be an excellent site with the potential to produce great wine. Their winemaker would be Zelma Long, who, during an estimable career, has worked as head winemaker for Robert Mondavi, then winemaker and CEO for Simi Winery in Sonoma County. She also happens to be Freese's wife. Soon, a fourth partner was on board, in the shape of Bartholomew Broadbent, son of Michael Broadbent MW and owner of Broadbent Selections, one of the most important distribution companies in the United

States. Together the four partners acquired the Vilafonté vineyard.

Joint ventures have been all the rage for some time now, most commonly as a supposedly symbiotic snuggling-up between a grand European estate and an ambitious New World partner. But somewhere along the way, joint ventures refused to settle for being just new wines: each was trumpeted as a marriage made in Heaven – bottled perfection, encapsulating the glamour and gravitas of the Old World along with the youth and vigour of the New.

The very words joint venture will set alarm bells ringing for many now, with sceptics claiming to see through the soft focus of the wedding-album snaps to the common reality of young vines, untested terroir, a triumph of marketing over substance and unjustifiably high price tags.

Vilafonté may be one of the exceptions. Certainly the vines are still young, and the wines are priced high at £30–40 (\$55–75). But with Freese's and Long's almost fanatical attention to detail and their palpable belief in this particular site, there may be a solid foundation to this particular structure. Philip van Zyl, editor

of the influential *John Platter South African Wine Guide*, welcomes the partnership: 'The sort of foreign involvement that will help generate real star wattage has largely been absent from the Cape. The Vilafonté project, with its US connection, is exciting.'

Freese planted the ancient gravel and clay soils with Bordeaux varieties in 1998 and 1999, at 5,200 vines per hectare – about double the density of most vineyards in South Africa. Aerial infrared and multispectral imagery was used to map the geology and ensure a perfect match of rootstock to soil. These techniques were originally developed by Freese in tandem with NASA, and they have changed the way new vineyards are being planted the world over.

Freese and Long take a little house close to Stellenbosch for several months a year, arriving at harvest, staying until the wine is in barrel, then returning for blending and bottling. For now, they make the wine in rented space in the stunning new Tokara winery, situated between Franschoek and Stellenbosch. But despite having an agreement to use Tokara for four to six years, the Vilafonté partners plan to build their

own winery. Ratcliffe says, 'We are quite far down the line on this: the financing is in place, and we are looking at one or two really good sites.'

Only 12 of Vilafonté's 42 hectares are currently planted, and less than 50 per cent of their fruit makes it into the two estate wines; the rest is sold off to other wineries. Yields are strictly controlled, though Freese believes that as the vines age, and are carefully managed, he has the soil, aspect and planting density to increase quality as well as yield. With some new planting too, production may rise to 7,000–8,000 cases – which is double the current level.

Vilafonté's two wines – Series C and Series M – are blends intended to express a Cabernet or Merlot character. Though these two varieties are dominant in the blends for the first release, Long says that won't necessarily always be the case: she is more concerned with achieving the right character than with the specific proportions of the blend. 'I am already identifying fruit that I can designate for Series C or Series M while it is still on the vine,' she says. 'Eventually I expect 75 per cent of the designation will be done by vineyard selection, rather than by tasting the wines in barrel.'

Many New World producers are trying to define and promote terroir rather than fruit as the key to their premium wines, so to market these wines as characteristic grape-based styles seems at odds with current thinking. Ratcliffe doesn't see it that way, though: 'Phil [Freese] hates the word terroir. Every patch of earth has terroir – the secret lies in what you plant on it and how you tend it. That's how you achieve excellence. We are not trying to leverage terroir as a marketing advantage: 99 per cent of people who drink our wine will never see the vineyard, but they will all taste what's in the bottle.'

The wines have recently been released in the UK through Louis Latour, with the US release to follow in July/August through Broadbent Selections. Time will tell how they are received, but one thing

seems sure: the diverse but perfectly complementary skills of the four partners – in management, viticulture, wine making and distribution – mean that this joint venture is more equal, and more natural, than many.

Vilafonté Series C 2003 (82% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc, 2% Malbec) has a leafy quality on the nose, with some cedar and quite delicate black-cherry and floral fruit. The palate is striking and bold, with chewy tannins dominating at present, but also plenty of svelte, glossy black fruit and a keen edge of acidity. Although a little hollow on the mid-palate, the support of the toasty oak fills it out on the long finish, and it should come together well.

Vilafonté Series M 2003 (41% Merlot, 39% Cabernet Sauvignon, 16% Malbec, 4% Cabernet Franc) has a cedary, more earthy, spicier quality, but again with black-cherry fruit on the nose. The palate is intensely fruity and juicy, with a rasp of bittersweet plum skin and cherry acidity. It has good grip and structure, and that juicy plum fruit persists, with a deepening chocolaty character, on the finish.