

Vilafonté

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. Ex head-honcho 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 42-hectare vineyard in the Paarl region called Vilafonté.

A plan began to formulate that they should acquire the Vilafonté vineyard, which Freese believed to be a site of real excellence, capable of making great wine. Their winemaker would be Zelma Long, who's estimable career saw her work as head winemaker for Robert Mondavi, then winemaker and CEO for Simi Winery in Sonoma County. She also happens to be Phil Freese's wife.

Soon, a fourth partner was on board, in the shape of Bartholomew Broadbent, son of Michael and owner of Broadbent Selections, one of the most important distribution companies in the USA.

They acquired the Vilafonté vineyard, and Vilafonté was born.

The Joint Venture has been all the rage for decades now, most commonly a symbiotic snuggling-up between a grand European estate and an ambitious New World partner. The theory of the Joint Venture is to maximise the positive aspects of each business, fusing Old World know-how with New World vines and technology.

But somewhere along the way, the Joint Venture didn't settle for being just another new wine, but trumpeted itself as a marriage made in Heaven: bottled perfection encapsulating the glamour and gravitas of the Old World with the youth and virginal purity of the New.

The very words "Joint Venture" will set alarm bells ringing for many people. Sceptics claim to see through the soft focus of the wedding album snaps, to a reality of unjustifiably high prices, young vines, un-tested terroir and a triumph of marketing over substance.

Vilafonté is perhaps different. The vines are still young, and the wines are priced high at £30 - £40 (\$55 - \$75), but with Freese and Long's almost fanatical attention to detail, and their palpable belief in this single, specific vineyard site, there may just be a solid foundation to this particular structure.

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 in South Africa. Aerial infra-red and multi-spectral 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 have changed the way new vineyards are being planted 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 the wine is made in rented space within the stunning new Tokara winery situated between Franschoek and Stellenbosch. Though they have an agreement to use Tokara for

four to six years, Vilafonté intends to build its own winery. Mike 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”.

For now, only 12 of Vilafonté’s 42 hectares are planted, and less than 50% 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 managed carefully, he has the soil, aspect and planting density to allow yields to increase whilst also improving quality. With some new planting too, production may top out at around 7-8,000 cases eventually; double the current level.

Vilafonté makes only two wines, named “Series C” and “Series M”, each a blend intended to express a Cabernet character (C) or Merlot character (M). Though these 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 the specific proportions of the blend. She says “I am already identifying fruit that I can designate for Series C or Series M whilst still on the vine. Eventually I expect 75% of the designation will be by vineyard selection, rather than from tasting wine in barrels”.

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. Mike Ratcliffe doesn’t see it that way: “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% of people who drink our wine will never see the vineyard, but they will all taste what’s in the bottle”.

The wines will be releases in July/August in the USA through Broadbent Selections, and in the UK though Louis Latour. Time will tell how they are received, but one thing is obvious: the diverse but perfectly interlocking skills of the four partners - in management, viticulture, wine making and distribution - mean this Joint Venture seems more equal, and more natural, than many.

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, plenty of svelte, glossy black fruit, and a keen edge of acidity. There is perhaps a touch of hollowness on the mid-palate, but a toasty support of oak fills-out on the long finish and it should come together well.

Series M 2003 (41% Merlot, 16% Malbec, 39% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Cabernet Franc 4%) has a spicier, very cedary and quite savage quality, with black cherry fruit on the nose. The palate it juicy and filled with blackcurrant fruit, with a rasp of bittersweet plum skin and cherry acidity. It has a grippy quality, but that juicy plum fruit persists.