

VILAFONTÉ

One of our nominees for New World Winery of the Year, Vilafonté is a partnership between California-based winemaker Zelma Long and viticulturist Phil Freese and South African-based general manager Mike Ratchliffe. It's a project that they say is focused on "uncompromising quality," one that seeks to prove that South African wines can be among the best in the world.

Long is probably best known as the longtime winemaker at Simi (from 1979 until her promotion to president of the winery in 1989 and CEO a year later), although she started her career at Robert Mondavi. She also founded Long Vineyards with then-husband Robert Long in 1977. Freese, Long's current husband and business partner, was a viticulturist at Mondavi for 13 years; Ratchliffe is general manager of his family's Warwick Estate winery.

Of the 100 acres in Paarl that Zelma and Phil purchased in 1997, 30 have been planted to red Bordeaux varieties at relatively high vine densities for South Africa (vine spacing is approximately 4 feet by 5 feet). Although the original plan called for following the Bordeaux model of producing a "first" and "second" wine, the wines now being released are simply labeled Series C and Series M. The C is a Cab-dominant blend, the M is Merlot dominated; but the designations refer not strictly to the numbers in the blend (the Series M contains more Cabernet Sauvignon than it does Merlot), but to the wines' styles.

With this pedigree and such lofty goals, expectations for the wines were high when the trio visited our Westchester offices this past summer. Fortunately, our editors were not disappointed.

92 Vilafonté 2003 Series C (Paarl); \$70. A fairly big (14.5% alcohol), chewy wine, but one that delivers waves of lush fruit. Plum and cassis notes are framed by hints of smoke and cedar; the merest hint of green herbs adds complexity without detracting. Long and supple on the finish. Drink now–2015.

91 Vilafonté 2003 Series M (Paarl); \$50. Rounder and softer in the mouth than the Series C, with plump plum and chocolate flavors that pick up hints of caramel, toast and dried herbs on the finish. Soft but not unstructured, this is immediately likeable. Drink now–2010. It might last longer, but why chance it?

84 Golden Kaan 2004 Chardonnay (Western Cape); \$10. This medium-bodied Chardonnay opens with understated scents of apples and honey, then follows with earthy, mineral flavors that fold in hints of apple, citrus and pear. Imported by Golden Kaan USA. —J.C.

83 KVV 2004 Chardonnay (Western Cape); \$10. On the heavy side, with baked apple and spiced orange flavors that finish soft. Imported by 57 Main Street Wine Co. —J.C.

82 Gôiya 2004 Chardonnay (Western Cape); \$7. Has some tasty elements, ranging from grilled peaches to roasted nuts, but they fail to come together with a true sense of harmony, leaving rough edges behind on the slightly bitter finish. Imported by Hemingway and Hale. —J.C.

OTHER WHITES

89 Bradgate 2005 Chenin Blanc-Sauvignon Blanc (Stellenbosch); \$9. A full style of wine, named after the home of the Jordan family, who produce this wine. It is packed with great acidity balancing nutty fruit flavors. A touch of vanilla comes through, leaving a wine that is generous and full, but still leaves a fresh, crisp aftertaste. Imported by Vinnovative Imports. **Best Buy.** —R.V.

89 Umkhulu 2004 Dry White (Stellenbosch); \$NA. A wine with a fine, nutty complexity over ripe fruit, with a touch of toast and a full, buttery flavor. This is developing well, but could age another 18 months. Imported by South Atlantic. —R.V.

84 Gôiya 2004 Chardonnay-Sauvignon Blanc (Olifants River); \$7. This 50-50 blend is dominated by the Sauvignon Blanc, but tamed by the Chardonnay. Smoky and flinty on the nose, with mineral and fresh herb flavors, and a citrusy finish. It's light in weight, without a lot of intensity, but what did you expect for \$7? Imported by Hemingway and Hale. **Best Buy.** —J.C.

84 Golden Kaan 2004 Sauvignon Blanc (Western Cape); \$10. This crisp Sauvignon doesn't wow with intensity, weight or complexity. But it is a clean, well-crafted wine at an excellent price. Snappy grapefruit flavors are buttressed by hints of honeyed peach and a refreshing finish. Imported by Golden Kaan USA. —J.C.

82 Serengeti 2004 Sauvignon Blanc (Coastal Region); \$13. Veers a bit too far into the vegetal lane for this reviewer, although others may find it simply herbal. Passion fruit and citrus elements lose out to green pepper and asparagus notes. Short finish. Imported by Hemingway and Hale. —J.C.

SHIRAZ

87 Eventide Cellar 2002 Wellington Shiraz (South Africa); \$15. Richly scented with aromas that resemble a cross between graham crackers and Nilla Wafers, plus a few tablespoons blackberry preserves. It's still young and rambunctious, with assertive oak warring a bit with t jammy fruit, but should settle down in another year or two, while still retaining a bit of an untamed, rustic edge. Imported by Southern Starz, Inc. —J.C.

87 Serengeti 2003 Shiraz (Coastal Region); \$13. A trifle soft, but otherwise very drinkable, this medium-bodied Shiraz boasts ample red raspberry and vanilla flavors sure to please most drinkers. Shows more elegance and a better integration of components than many of its brethren, ending on a supple, harmonious note. Imported by Hemingway and Hale. —J.C.

86 Cederberg 2003 Shiraz (South Africa); \$30. Starts off promising, with scents of mixed berries and lashings of vanilla and dried spices that continue onto and through the palate. A nicely balanced wine, one that may be a bit on the tart side, with metallic hints on the finish that may prove troublesome with age. Drink now. Imported by Global Vineyard Importers. —J.C.

85 Bilton 2002 Shiraz (Stellenbosch); \$25. Shows a hint of volatility in its high-toned, mixed-berry and pie crust aromas, then settles down a bit on the palate, where the predominant flavors are of tart cherries and cranberries. Finishes with flourishes of toast and vanilla. Imported by Southern Starz, Inc. —J.C.

85 Gôiya 2004 Shiraz (Western Cape); \$7. Starts with some rather baked fruit aromas, but quickly settles down to deliver balanced plum and cherry fruit on a medium-bodied frame. Dry and slightly peppery on the finish. Imported by Hemingway and Hale. **Best Buy.** —J.C.

85 Kumkani 2002 Shiraz (Stellenbosch); \$15. This medium-weight, supple wine stood apart from the other South African Shirazes in its flight for its dark, meaty aromas and flavors. Roast beef-like flavors add coffee and plum notes, then finish crisp. Imported by Southern Starz, Inc. —J.C.

83 Kumala 2004 Shiraz (Western Cape); \$9. Earthy and dry, with flavors reminiscent of black cherries covered in fine, wind-borne dust. Imported by Vincor USA. —J.C.

82 Robertson Winery 2003 Shiraz (Robertson); \$10. Shows plenty of character, but it's not always entirely pleasant, combining