

Mike Ratcliffe

Vilafonté – Luxury series for wine style

by HymI Krige

"Luxury is extremely superfluous, but extremely necessary," is how Coco Chanel, famous trendsetter for luxury goods, defines the category. Which makes a lot of sense in wine. Any new wine brand introduced to the market today, could be regarded as superfluous. There are more than enough eager labels aspiring to be a conversation topic. But a real luxury wine brand for the South African wine category ... that is an absolute necessity.

Mike Ratcliffe, General Manager and Marketer for Vilafonté – positioned as "the first South African luxury wine brand" – is outspoken about the vision for the brand, but suitably humble about its achievements to date. It is early days in a marketing sense, but these are the most important days in terms of establishing introductions and making a lasting impression.

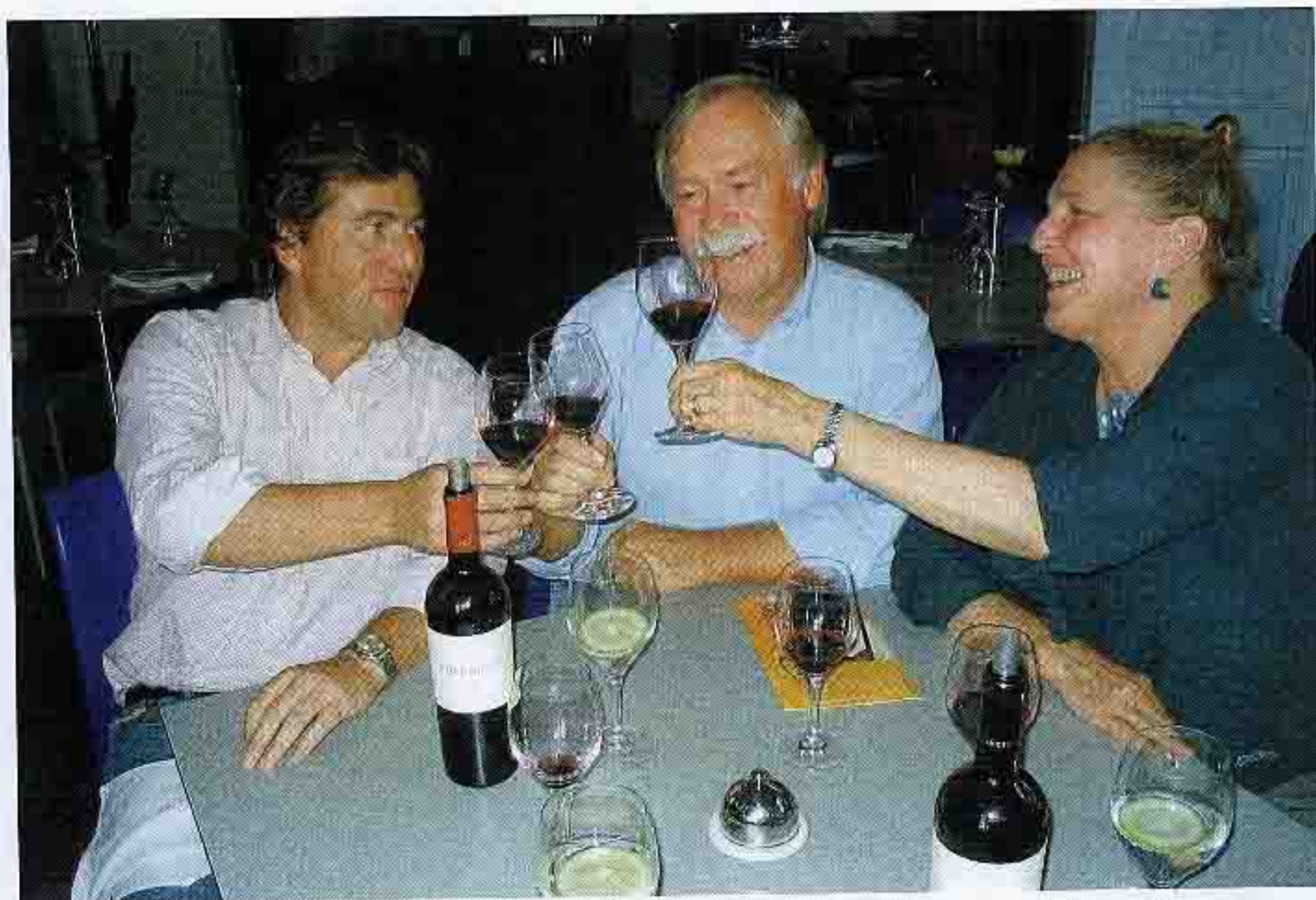
First introductions to the trio that form the core of Vilafonté leaves a complex mix of impressions. Winemaker Zelma Long is the one that talks with energy through her dark rimmed glasses about the two wine styles born from the same vineyard. Winegrower Phil Freese is more soft-spoken – and very visual in his descriptions of vineyards and context-sensitive winemaking. Mike Ratcliffe is the more edgy intellectual, confident

about a winning concept.

And by all measures, the birth chart of Vilafonté shows a promising future:

"It is a South African wine," Mike explains, "but not a South African brand. We would like this to be an internationally significant wine." Which means that they will judge their success not by benchmarking the South African wine category, but by an entirely different set of criteria. Mike lists them: "1. Profitability. 2. Recognition by our peers, both in South Africa and internationally. 3. Acceptance by the media – reporting about our successes and not about our plans. 4. Consumer recognition – people buying into the brand for its intrinsic value."

Vilafonté started out as a vision that was written up in the form of a back label. Zelma's idea,



South Africa's first luxury wine brand has been born from the efforts of this threesome: Mike Ratcliffe, Phil Freese and Zelma Long – all investing specialised skills into their Vilafonté wine.

They started looking for a vineyard that fits Phil's philosophy of high density planting. The marketing strategy, according to Mike, only developed after having made their first few wines. Hard to believe, but then there is a collective nod around the table when Zelma says, "Our brand is our site."

The compressed version of the brand story reads as forth: Vilafonté is named after one of the six soil types on the 12 ha Paarl farm that is home to the brand. The initial idea was to create one red blend from Bordeaux varieties – until Zelma confronted the team with a rather unique dilemma: their vineyard was delivering two entirely different styles of wine, both excellent. From this dilemma the two series were born: Vilafonté Series M and Series C.

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Some people would call it subliminal marketing. Most people won't notice. But it is there, it is subtle and it is very clever. Think luxury cars or diamonds – all designated by series! In this case the series denote style: M for Merlot style and C for Cabernet style. Which does not in any way mean that the style has to be dominated by Merlot or Cabernet, but simply that you can expect either the luscious, fruit driven and softer style associated with Merlot, or the more structured, bold and classic style associated with Cabernet Sauvignon.

"It is a style expression, not a varietal expression", the Vilafonté team explains. "One brand in two styles." This means that they use one label, with the series indication as a subtext.




Read any theory on luxury goods and you will be told that consumers of luxury goods are highly impacted by appearance. The Vilafonté label is very, very simple – but elegant. It is textured in a way that reminds one of soil layers, and which aptly reinforces the name.

Leaning forward in his chair, Mike tells about his own research during the past few years. He has hundreds of photographs of bottles of wine, with notes about their prices and popularity. It is an ongoing hobby for him – to discover what works, and why. "Simplicity sells", is his summary.

For the Vilafonté team, the luxury branding of their wine has resulted in several hard decisions. Such as not having a second label, but simply selling off any wine that they do not use for their blends. They also believe that to be a luxury brand, you have to be available. "Two out of three bottles of Vilafonté go to the US, where we plan to have a presence in 39 states," is Mike's calculation. But they also have small quantities available in most of the EU countries, the UK, Singapore, Canada and South Africa.

With the USA their main focus – and Phil and Zelma's home market – one has to ask whether that market is ready for a luxury brand from South Africa. It is a market where the general awareness of South Africa is still very low, so how credible would a luxury brand be – considering that a large number of American consumers do not even know that we make wine? The threesome responds with predictable enthusiasm. They see an advantage in being first to market, and as individuals they believe that they have the international credibility to make this work!

Consumers buying luxury goods are savvy, have high expectations and buy for pleasure. Price is not an issue. And on this, Vilafonté will have to deliver. 

MIKE'S BACKGROUND

- ▶ Bachelor of Commerce from University Stellenbosch.
- ▶ Graduated with a Diploma in Wine Marketing from the University of Adelaide.
- ▶ Managing Director of Warwick.
- ▶ Board member of WOSA.
- ▶ Trustee of SAWIT.

ZELMA'S BACKGROUND

- ▶ One of the first women to study enology and viticulture at UC Davis.
- ▶ Winemaker at Mondavi and Simi.
- ▶ Winner of the James Beard Award for Wine Professional of the Year, MASI award for international wine contribution and the *Wine Spectator* sponsored Oral History of a California Wine Pioneer.

PHIL'S BACKGROUND

- ▶ 13 years as Mondavi's Vice-President of Wine Growing.
- ▶ Head of vineyard development and management for Opus One.
- ▶ International viticultural consultant.

CHECKLIST

- ▶ Judge an international luxury brand not by benchmarking the South African wine category, but by an entirely different set of criteria.
- ▶ "Our brand is our site".
- ▶ Consumers of luxury goods are highly impacted by appearance.
- ▶ "Simplicity sells".
- ▶ They see an advantage in being first to market, and as individuals they believe that they have the international credibility to make this work!