

Zelma goes long

California pioneer finds independence in South Africa

Thom Elkjer, Special to The Chronicle

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Helshoogte Pass, South Africa -- Winemaker Zelma Long ducks under a loudly rattling bottling line and quickly consults the bottling plan on a nearby clipboard. Then she fingers a cork to check the printing on its side, turns to monitor the fill level on the passing bottles, and gives an encouraging smile to the apron-clad workers stacking corked bottles in bins. Seconds later, she ducks back under the line and out into the cellar for a word with the assistant winemaker.

It's a routine she has performed hundreds of times in her 35-vintage career, which includes producing legendary Cabernet Sauvignons at Robert Mondavi Winery in Napa Valley in the 1970s and righting the Simi Winery ship in Sonoma County in the 1980s and 1990s. But it's hardly routine today. That's because this respected wine consultant isn't dropping in on a client to make sure all is well. The Bordeaux-style red wines coming off the line on this November day are as much her own as any she's ever made.

Below: Phillip Freese, Zelma Long and Mike Ratcliffe (left to right) make luxury South African wine specifically for the U.S. market.

Photo courtesy Vilafonté Winery

She's making these wines for the Vilafonté label she co-founded in 1997 with her husband, Phillip Freese, and Mike Ratcliffe, scion of one of the world's renowned wine families. Freese grows the grapes and Ratcliffe markets the wine, making Long the center of an enterprise intended to do something no one has ever done: create a wine designed expressly for export to American wine drinkers -- from South Africa.

Long and Freese know that all South Africa needs to rise in the global export wine game is the right kind of attention, the kind that Penfolds Grange gave Australia and Montes Alpha gave Chile. They also know they can make such a wine not as interlopers, but as longtime participants in the South African wine scene.



Courtesy Vilafonté Winery

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"People here have seen Phil and Zelma, vintage in and vintage out, for years," Ratcliffe says. "They are not at all considered flying winemakers (short-term consultants), if they ever were."

One of the first

Long, 62, began her career in 1970, becoming the second female UC Davis-trained winemaker in California after Mary Ann Graf (now retired). After working as Mondavi's chief enologist until 1979, Long became one of the state's first women to run both the cellar and business side of a major winery, serving as winemaker/vice president, president and finally CEO at Simi in Healdsburg in the 1980s and 1990s.

One might think she has little need to score more points, but the woman at work in the winery today is clearly excited, perhaps even a bit nervous.



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The debut release of the Vilafonté wines in the United States came in July 2005. The 2003 Vilafonté Series C Paarl Cabernet Sauvignon-based wine (\$70) and the 2003 Vilafonté Series M Paarl (\$50), predominantly Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, have earned critical praise. Long, who is not given to exaggeration, describes them as "the best wines I have ever made as a group."

Can Long, Freese and Ratcliffe sustain world-class wine production and brisk sales from a country most people in America know little nothing about?

Long and her partners are not leaving anything to chance. It starts in the vineyard, where Freese, 60, defies convention after convention in South Africa. Unlike the lush-leaf, vigorous canopies that make most South African vineyards look like bright green shag carpets, his vines are low in stature, packed together and kept in check by selective irrigation and underground drainage. It's a high-density scheme that allows for low production of grapes per vine and thus more intensity of color and flavor in the fruit.

"Some people laugh at what we're doing," Freese admits. "Some people think we're arrogant. We're just trying to make good wine."

Sorting by hand

When the grapes arrive at the Tokara winery, near South Africa's wine capital of Stellenbosch, Long takes over. There, she has the fruit sorted by hand to pull out the undesirable grapes, leaves and twigs -- a practice that has become standard at boutique wineries in California. Long, however, has her fruit sorted not once, but three times. Often hers are the final fingers to comb through the grapes before they disappear into the crusher.

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Ratcliffe is a fourth-generation managing director of South Africa's illustrious Warwick Winery, where his mother Norma was the country's first female winemaker. He has started emulating Long's meticulous approach at Warwick and reports that in the 2005 harvest, Warwick culled 4 percent of its fruit -- 14 tons that it would have crushed before.

"That was an eye-opener," he says, "but once you see things the way Zelma sees them, they look different."

Long's stint at Simi was marked by steady progress toward prominence. In 1979, the winery's new corporate owners wanted to resuscitate the historic operation, which had fallen off the pace in wine quality and consumer perception. They chose Long, then at Mondavi, to lead the winemaking.

Ten years later, after she had spearheaded development of a new cellar, new production lines and even new vineyard projects, she was named president. She spent the '90s keeping Simi at the forefront of the power surge that made California wine a force to be reckoned with internationally.

Did she feel like a pioneer? "I was a pioneer," she responds. "But if you ask other pioneers what they were feeling, they'll probably tell you they were working too hard to think about it."



Chronicle / Craig Lee

Ironically, it was new international owners who caused Long to say adieu to Simi in 1999. By then, she and Freese had been married almost a decade. Among the many things they shared as a couple was an excitement about South Africa, a nation that once exported fine wine to European rulers, most notably Napoleon.

Long and Freese had been invited to the country in 1990, during apartheid. The import/export sanctions imposed by the rest of the world meant that the South African wine industry was on the sidelines just as the global wine export boom was taking off.

When sanctions were lifted in 1994, Long and Freese were among the few Californians who knew firsthand the potential of the Western Cape wine lands. In Long and Freese, meanwhile, South Africa had the perfect consultants to help it make up for lost time.

"Phil was the viticulturalist who started people in California working backward from the wine to the vineyards instead of the old way of just growing some fruit and then making wine out of it," Long explains. "When people in South Africa would ask him what they should do in the vineyards, he would ask, 'Well, what do you want in the bottle?' It changed a lot of people's approach to the whole process of winemaking."

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Meanwhile, Long was advising in the cellar with her blend of broad experience, patient professionalism and personal power.

They were each doing plenty of consulting in the United States, but conditions in South Africa were different -- land was cheaper and the industry was keen to rev up an export machine like the ones that had put Australia, Chile and New Zealand on the map while South Africa slumbered.

Winemaking by laptop

Furthermore, their consulting work meant that Long and Freese weren't home together in their Chalk Hill hideaway near Healdsburg more than a week or two each month. She was regularly taking long trips, her ubiquitous laptop in her briefcase. He would commute daily to clients in Napa, Sonoma and farther afield. Freese jokes that he once felt envious that Long was better known, "But then I spent two weeks on the road, like she does almost every month, and the feeling passed."

So they concocted something new: a label of their own, grown in South Africa for the U.S. market. When they asked Ratcliffe to suggest a financial and marketing partner, he nominated himself. Vilafonté was born.

The vines are still young, five to seven years. Long is using someone else's winery and she lives more than 10,000 miles away. Yet the Vilafonté wines are the kind that make one sit up and take notice -- they are like the best South African wines in terms of ripeness and inherent balance, yet possess greater intensity, concentration, length and structure.

It's a measure of her mastery that Long tossed her own winemaking plan out the window when she began tasting the different lots of wine she crushed from the vineyard's third year of production in 2003. Winemakers typically vinify grapes not just by variety, but by vineyard and even by blocks within a vineyard. The idea is to create as many components as possible for blending the best possible wine in the end.

"I was planning to use the Bordeaux model where you're known for your first label, such as Mouton Rothschild, and whatever lots don't make it in that blend go into a second label," Long says. "But when I tasted the lots, there were two distinct style rivers flowing out of the vineyard."

Thus Vilafonté has two "first" wines -- the "C" series (for its dominant grape, Cabernet Sauvignon) and the "M" series (for its blend leader, Merlot). Both have various percentages of Cabernet Franc and Malbec as well.

The leftover lots? "They go into an underground river," Freese cracks, meaning they disappear into another wine under a different label.

The "C" style is strikingly like a classic Bordeaux -- structured, reserved, dense



Courtesy Vilafonté Winery

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and dark. "M" is not your grandfather's Merlot, but a big, balanced flood of fruit that pushes the taste buttons at once.

Long is a keenly intelligent woman who thinks before she speaks and looks a person in the eye when she talks, yet can unleash a hearty laugh when she's amused. Freese is an affable guy who looks like he could be running a local Safeway -- except that he has a Ph.D in biochemistry and biophysics from UC Davis and got Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory to help him develop high-tech underground imaging systems so grape growers can "see" the layers of soil beneath their feet.

At home they are surrounded by a serene landscape that's natural California woodland in front and lush green oasis in back. Inside the house is an eclectic collection of art and artifacts they have picked up on their travels, including a number of trips to Nepal.

Long remains a partner in Long Vineyards with her ex-husband, Bob Long, so she's already got a classy Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon with her name on it.

Renovation expert

Meanwhile, Freese is surrounded by major turnarounds he's been part of, such as helping pull Seghesio Family Vineyards out of a White-Zinfandel-and-jug-wine tailspin in the mid-1990s to soar today as one of Sonoma County's top red-Zin houses.

It all looks idyllic. So what drove them to launch their own brand this late in their careers -- and on the other side of the planet? At bottom, the motivation seems to be equal parts world-class vision and old-fashioned personal pride. They are clearly not ready to rest on their laurels.

"One thing we have in common is that when you give us a challenge, we rise to it," Long says. "It helps that each of us has the other one as a resource, but we were like this long before we met."

When it's pointed out that the two created this challenge for themselves, Long permits herself a shy smile and nods.

"We're doing it all ourselves rather than playing out someone else's vision," she says. "It's really hard to put that sense of satisfaction into words."

And so she doesn't. Instead, she turns to her laptop, takes a sip of coffee and gets back to work.

Thom Elkjer writes about wine for books, magazines and Web sites in the United States and Europe, including "Anthony Dias Blue's Pocket Guide to Wine 2006." E-mail him at wine@sfchronicle.com.