

# BUSINESS REPORT

## NEWS

### **Wine venture to give US luxury market a run for its money**

July 13, 2006

By Ronnie Morris

Cape Town - A joint South African-American wine making venture is aiming to take on Californian wine makers in their own backyard by selling its wine in the luxury segment of the market.

California dreaming?

Not if Mike Ratcliffe and his US partners Zelma Long and her husband, Phill Freese, owners of Vilafonté in Paarl, have their way. Vilafonté was named after the soil Vilafontes, but the origin of the names had been obscured by time, Ratcliffe said.

The vineyard, established in 1998, produces two wines: the Vilafonté Series M to denote the merlot style and the Series C to denote the cabernet style.

The wines are produced in the cellar of Tokara, the Stellenbosch wine cellar owned by GT Ferreira, chairman of FirstRand Bank. The joint venture was, however, building its own cellar.

Ratcliffe said the joint venture with Long and Freese was the first South African-US wine growing venture and the first to focus exclusively on the luxury segment of the US market, where the wine sells for between \$50 (R356) and \$70 a bottle.

He stressed that it was an international wine project focused on the luxury market. The wine has also done well locally, where a limited number of cases were sold at a discount of R250 per bottle.

The intention was not to lose the wine's local identity. It was also intended to be a project of integrity, international significance and to position the wine in the luxury sector.

Freese said some of the factors that influenced them to plant vines at Vilafonté were the climate, soil and the character of the wine.

So far 13ha were under vine, with a further three to be planted in Spring, 2ha of the Malbec varietal and 1ha of merlot.

Unlike other vineyards, which planted about 2 500 vines per hectare, Vilafonté's density was 5 200 vines per hectare in order to gain maximum yield, he said.

Freese said they had more human input into their site than the French would.

Business Report  
The Cape Times  
South Africa