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## Zelma Long on icon wines



13 July 2006 by Kim Maxwell

*Offering a Cape taste test before the US release of Vilafonté's latest 2004 vintage, Zelma Long explains why icon wines should be SA's calling card.*



Winemaker Zelma Long consults to at least a dozen cellars and could pick a number of countries to produce an ultra-premium wine from. That she and viticulturist husband Phil Freese chose a Paarl vineyard is significant - they produce Vilafonté in collaboration with Warwick's Mike Ratcliffe. Long isn't paying lip service in a flying-winemaker way either. 'Vilafonté is the most exciting wine project I do - and I consult a lot. I consider it the core of my career,' she says. 'Consulting is about the satisfaction of helping people reach their goals, but Vilafonté is about the satisfaction of returning to work one piece of land year after year.'



Zelma Long

Commenting on the brand's success since the maiden 2003 launch a year ago of a wine aimed primarily at the US market, Long says no wines are easy to launch there. Hindrances include the variety of labels on offer, and a complex US distribution system. She credits in part, the advantage of being able to capitalize on their [Long and Freese's] joint reputations for quality winemaking and viticulture in the same market. She also applauds SA wine progress in USA, likening its achievements generically over 10 years, to what Californian wine accomplished as a category in 30 years.



But let's face it: the USA isn't overly familiar with South African geography or wines. 'The American vision of SA wines in the last 10 years has been very positive - high quality wines in small or medium volumes. I see big differences now with five years ago, on retail shelves and wine lists. Although sales volumes are modest, the base is good,' she comments. Long feels SA wines need a significant campaign that invests in the US market every year, similar to the wine spend of Australia and New Zealand. 'This kind of thing promotes the country first. It's not that Americans have a negative image of SA, it's that Americans have no image,' she says.

Long has backed icon wines as SA's way forward for some time. Opening the Nederburg Auction in 2001, she suggested SA lead with its best, through positioning offerings in the super and ultra-premium categories. The payback would be high international recognition and profitability,



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while becoming attuned to an affluent wine-consuming public over the long term.

Speaking five years on, while showing her own icon wine - a 2004 vintage of Series M and Series C - Long hasn't changed her tune. Vilafonté's focus is the rapidly expanding luxury market. 'Yes, SA needs more icon wines,' she confirms. 'The faster SA can get on the world scene, the better. I've always thought SA's place is producing special and high-end wines that are specific to sites. Not value-orientated wines.' The Vilafonté 2003 Series M (a Bordeaux blend dominated by Merlot) illustrates her point with a unique vineyard-specific - not variety-specific - offering at R250 or US\$50. With fleshier Merlot suppleness dominating, soft tannins and elegance, it drinks well, with ageable potential. The Cabernet Sauvignon-dominated Series C 2003 Bordeaux-blend counterpart (R350 or US\$70) is intense and structured with maximum cellaring potential. The 2004 versions – end of July release – while not as consumer-friendly now, exhibit a similar stylistic profile respectively. Long's philosophy rests on ability to age as a mark of wine quality. She's confident that sufficient customers are after high-end wines with long-term cellaring potential, despite a society keen on instant solutions.

Quality is unmistakable, but can we taste South Africa? 'SA wines are tighter, with more structure – more underlying tannins – than big Napa Valley wine favourites such as Insignia,' explains Long. Her wines are elegantly crafted without being wannabe-Parker in style. Long says that's intentional. Although she has clients who instruct her to make Parker wines, and acknowledges that a favourable score never hurts, Long says her wines aren't designed to suit his palate.

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