



# Wines of South Africa

Variety is in our nature



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## The appliance of science

by Chris Orr

I've always been slightly suspicious of wine-making that relies heavily on technology as a mainstay to making sure the product is superlative. When you take the level of involvement that nature has in the wine-making process, combine it with the level of human skill and judgment involved from the wine making side, to rely heavily on technology seems slightly unromantic.

But then, I've always been a little bit of a romantic (not that my wife would necessarily agree). So I was somewhat sceptical when I talked to Mike Ratcliffe, one of the partners behind South Africa's first aspiring 'First Growth', Vilafonte, about the 'science' involved in his project. Alongside him and knee deep in grapes are the legendary wine gurus Zelma Long (former head winemaker for Mondavi) and Phil Freese (formerly Opus One), who, whilst being California-based are long aficionados and fans of the South African wine scene. Mike himself is in charge of the family wine business, Warwick Estates, based in Stellenbosch, which is one of the best on the Cape – so there's certainly no shortage of skill involved.

However, I was fascinated to spend some time with Mike recently, explaining why his wines were so impressive. I knew they were impressive, because I'd tasted them on several occasions, but didn't quite tag the science side of the project. 'Don't get me wrong,' he explains, 'the vineyard's situation, the health of the vineyards, the viticultural practice, is all crucial. If we didn't have great 'terroir' to begin with, then all the rest wouldn't matter. But we are using a great deal of modern technology to squeeze every drop of quality we can out of the vineyards.'

And he's not wrong. In addition to great terroir, extremely careful viticulture and lot of intense winemaking (they literally sort the grapes berry by berry to ensure no little rotters get in the final blend and only bottle a small percentage of the wine made in any one year), they apply what can only be described as cutting edge science. For example, thanks to work that Freese has done with NASA in the past, they have been using



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### Colours of a New Day – by Emma Kilonback

South Africa Tourism hosted a multi-sensory showcase of the South African Experience in Hanover Square, London. [more>>](#)

### Franschhoek: Picture-Postcard Perfect – by Joanne Simon

There's so much more to wine than the wine itself, don't you think? Perhaps that's why a Retsina or Provençal rosé can taste so good on holiday. [more>>](#)

### SWIG – International Wine Challenge

South African Wine Merchant of the Year 2006. [more>>](#)

### Special offers

A host of interesting wines on special offers this month - at Waitrose, Somerfield and Thierry's with selected tasting

satellite technology in a number of guises to work out which vines are suffering from lack of water and which aren't. They have then been able to irrigate with pin-point precision, almost down to the single vine. And they've been able to work on what is the optimum time for picking certain sections of the vineyard.

When Ratcliffe explains it, it almost seems too much, too technical – in fact, with the NASA connection, almost too ridiculous. But then I tasted the wines again. The first vines were planted in 1998 and 1999. The first vintages generally released were 2003. And yet they already show immense quality and great potential – potential worth splashing out £20-£40 for.

But what does this mean. Well, it means that South Africa is capable, I think, of producing not just great wines, but potentially, one day, iconic wines. You might say, so what, with the number of 'icon' wines such as Opus One available from around the rest of the world. But it's crucial for the South African wine industry, because what Vilafonte is doing now to improve its overall viticulture and quality, will soon tickle down to the rest of the industry and have a direct impact. This will mean better wine for all in the long term – fingers crossed.



#### **Vilafonte Series M 2003 (£29.99)**

Vilafonte produce two wines. This is the Merlot blend (hence the M) mixed with Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon. This is soft, elegant, quite fruit forward, but with a surprising backbone that takes time to make its way through but once there gives it more grip than you expect. It's mid-term from the point of view of cellaring, but has the delight of being absolutely top class drinking from day one – will age brilliantly but will hit a plateau around 5-7 years or so.



#### **Vilafonte Series C 2003 (£39.99)**

Cracking Cabernet, but much more closed and reserved than the M series. This is a definite keeper, but it's already beginning to soften and become a much more attractive and forthcoming little gem. Lots of dark, brooding blackcurrant cassis lurk alongside a black cherry fruit, lots of spice, dark chocolate and smooth quite grippy tannins that are beginning to soften. Will be stunning between 5 and 10 years time, but probably carry on for more.

notes. [more>>](#)

#### **New on the market this month**

We have a great selection of new wines to bring you this month – including a major launch from Spier and Nederberg increasing its UK presence. As always where possible we'll provide brief tasting notes on each new wine.

[more>>](#)

#### **Events for your diary with Wines of South Africa**

7 - 8 October, The Tesco wine Fair Manchester  
26 - 29 October, The Wine Show

[more>>](#)

#### **News for October 2006**

**Kumala** is to give UK consumers the chance to relax with a major autumn wine promotion... **Spier** is promoting two major autumn events...

[more>>](#)



### **Vilafonte Series M 2004 (unreleased)**

This is a little more serious and intense than the first M in 2003. It shows more complexity combined with a little more backbone and less immediately soft fruit. However, it is still very attractive in its youth and with a little softening over the next six months will become similar in drinking terms to the 2003, only a little more serious with slightly firmer tannins. Again though, 5-7 years will see it hitting its top plateau.



### **Vilafonte Series C 2004 (unreleased)**

This is a step up from the 2003, though you only see it when comparing them directly glass by glass. There is something about the tannic structure and intensity of fruit, which transforms it from being a serious wine, to potentially great. It certainly is the best demonstration yet of what is potentially going to emerge from these vineyards over the coming years. Again a 5-10 years, but possibly beyond.



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Wines of South Africa is an independent not-for-profit organisation representing all South African wine producers who export their products internationally. Wines of South Africa aims to promote the export of all South African wines in key international markets.

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