

WAYWARD MERLOT



RESPONDING
to
NURTURING

Whether hi-tech or handcrafted, the Merlots currently being produced in South Africa are proving a pleasant surprise. **Wendy Toerien** explored the provenance of our top three, discovering that an understanding of a slightly wayward variety, combining dedicated vineyard care and natural but attentive winemaking, can produce delicious, deeply satisfying wines.

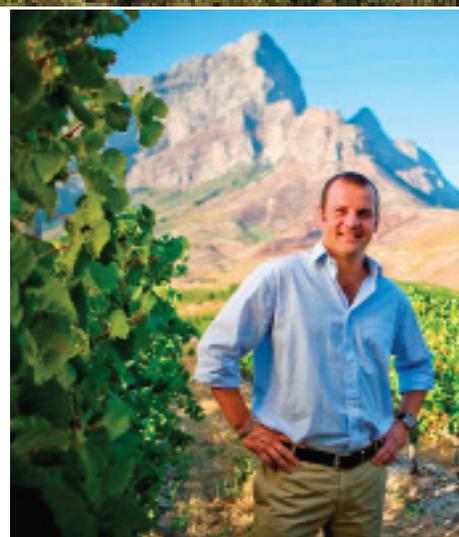


Anthonij Rupert Merlot 2007

From its home base on historic L'Ormarins wine farm beneath the craggy Groot Drakenstein mountain peaks on the way to Franschhoek, Anthonij Rupert Wines has cast its net wide to identify prime viticultural sites to produce terroir-specific wines. One such is the Anthonij Rupert Merlot 2007, one of the six red wines that make up its flagship range, named in remembrance of owner Johann Rupert's younger brother, the custodian of L'Ormarins until his untimely death in 2001.

'AR' Wines is the fruit of one of the most sophisticated and monied winegrowing enterprises in the Cape winelands, courtesy of Forbes-listed billionaire Johann. Having inherited and developed the family's luxury goods and investment holding companies from his late father Anton Rupert, who bought this early 18th-century Cape Dutch wine farm in 1969, Johann (together with sister Hanneli Koegelenberg at nearby La Motte) has carried the cudgels of commitment to preserving the Cape's cultural heritage through substantial involvement in not only art, architecture, music and nature conservation, but more pertinently wine.

A scientific assessment to identify prime viticultural sites particularly suited to specific classic French (and Italian) varieties has guided a long-term replanting programme, initiated by the late Anthonij and expanded by Johann, not just on L'Ormarins – where valley-floor cultivation has been replaced by plantings on mountain slopes – but elsewhere in the Cape.



Dawie Botha, red winemaker at Anthonij Rupert Wines.

This focus on terroir-specific viticulture and vinification has given rise to four different ranges of wines: the entry-level Protea bottlings; the Terra Del Capo collection devoted to Italian varieties; the Cape of Good Hope label expressing individual vineyards, sites or properties owned by or collaborated on in conjunction with maverick consultant Rosa Kruger; and the flagship Anthonij Rupert range, currently devoted to a Bordeaux-style blend and five single-varietal reds, one of which is the vaunted Anthonij Rupert Merlot 2007.

Its provenance is a Rupert-owned farm, Rooderust, near Darling up the West Coast just over 10km from the Atlantic. Cool nights ease hot, dry days, making for ideal conditions for grapes to ripen slowly but fully. Soils are mainly granite with varying clay content, which helps with moisture retention in what is a low-rainfall area, although drip irrigation is available as a supplement, scientifically applied with typical Rupert attention to detail.

This is where Anthonij Rupert reds – including the other Bordeaux varieties Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, as well as Shiraz, Chardonnay and Italian classic Sangiovese planted here – obtain their structure and weight, evidenced in the promise of longevity on a wine already into its seventh year in bottle. And to add dense colour, richness of fruit and greater complexity, some 15% of grapes were sourced from the Helderberg in Stellenbosch, a bench of south-facing vineyard land renowned for producing powerful reds.

Red-winemaker Dawie Botha, a young University of Stellenbosch graduate who has been here since 2005, has the rare privilege of working in one of the Cape winelands' most innovative cellars. Not overtly hi-tech, it is nevertheless a mechanical masterpiece, designed by structural engineer Gerard de Villiers (a winery designer and boutique wine farm owner). Machinery, computers and push-button operating systems are put to use with one sole aim: to ensure the gentle, free flow of grapes, juice and wine purely by gravitational force, regarded as one of the prerequisites for high-quality, authentically expressive wines.

Unobtrusive at ground level with its rustic red brick and compact, circular shape, it has another two levels sunk into the hillside behind the gracious L'Ormarins homestead. At the heart of the winery is a 32-ton cast-iron flywheel, mounted between the ground floor and lower level. Hand-sorted, cooled grapes are dropped through manholes into gondola buckets, which the flywheel then ferries to pre-selected stainless-steel fermentation tanks or large, conical, broad-based wooden fermenters.

The Merlot, like all wines in the Anthonij Rupert range, is made from free-run juice only. The fermenters stand atop traditional, epoxy-coated concrete tanks. After cold-soaking, the juice is bled off into the tank below, concentrating colour and flavour. Only natural yeasts are used for fermentation. A nitrogen gas blanket is used to limit oxidation. Micro-bacterial growth associated with natural fermentation is further inhibited by the use of 'blue light': ceiling-mounted photon lights that keep the air recharged to prevent the spread of microbes. This radically cuts down on the use of sulphur, permissible as a preservative during winemaking.

Instead of pump-overs or punch-downs – whether rough on the wine or just plain hard work – to keep juice and skins circulating during fermentation, a small stainless-steel tank (UFO meets R2-D2 meets Wall-E) is wheeled into place beneath the fermenter's portal, filled with free-run juice and mechanically hoisted up above the fermenter to disgorge its contents.

Choice wines, like the Anthonij Rupert Merlot, are fermented and



Clockwise from top left: The cellar at Marklew Wines; winemaker Duan Brits; winning wine; the Marklew family, Bill, Lyn, Haidee and Dudley, in front of the Cape Georgian homestead.

matured in only new wood, all French oak, using a combination of 225-litre and 500-litre barrels. Second and third pressings in mobile computer-controlled basket presses are redirected into the reds in the other ranges. These, together with the white wines, are made in the former 1 200-ton L'Ormarins winery, now refurbished and upgraded as the Terra Del Capo cellar to handle a quality-driven 400 tons, vinified by newly appointed winemaker Mark van Buuren.

Part of recent developments at L'Ormarins was the acquisition of a nearby wine property owned by Graham Beck. The hi-tech and architecturally distinctive modern winery is now the home of the Terra Del Capo tasting room and an antipasta 'bar'.

For a less buzzy, more gracious Cape Dutch heritage experience, the property's historic thatch-roofed, yellowwood-beamed, Graham Viney-decorated manor house has been reinvented as the Anthonij Rupert tasting room. It's where wine-lovers will find the Cape of Good Hope and Anthonij Rupert ranges, including the top-performing Merlot 2007.

Marklew Wines Merlot 2011

Merlot is the most popular of our wines,' says Haidee Marklew, who, with brother Bill and winemaker Duan Brits, are the warm-hearted, hands-on people behind Marklew Wines, a small family winery in the foothills of the Simonsberg that comprises some of Stellenbosch's and the Cape's prime viticultural terroir.

Her word choice ('popular'), spontaneous and unpretentious, is instructive. No flagships and top tiers here; no loud emphasis on show stickers and awards, though they were 'thrilled' when their Chardonnay 2010 won a Veritas Double Gold.

What they're most satisfied by is that their wines are consistently chosen by the Wine-of-the-Month Club tasting panel as a wine of choice for its members. And they've received seven listings in six years by South African Airways for serving in First Class – for Merlot as well as their Chardonnay, Cabernet and Pinotage – where approachability is one of the measures of intrinsic quality.

For the young Marklew siblings, wine is both their livelihood and their lives. They grew up on the farm known as De Goede Sukkes, acquired in 1970 by their parents Lyn and Dudley Marklew, who replanted old Chenin Blanc and Hermitage (Cinsaut) vineyards to classical varieties. The premium grapes produced went first to Nederburg, then under legendary vintner Günter Brözel, and then, from the 1990s, to KWV.

Marklew grapes are still being snapped up by KWV for its top-flight Mentors and Cathedral Cellars ranges. And nearby Kanonkop has signed up for their Pinotage. This is their bread-and-butter, says Bill, who studied finance at Stellenbosch University. But as the man also in charge of the vineyards, he is calmly conversant with all things vinous, from vines to wines.

He provides a succinct summary. The 58-hectare farm has 40 hectares under vine. Soils are rich red Hutton. Slopes are mostly west-facing. The Merlot comes from two old blocks planted in the early '90s to Italian clones, and two newer blocks of French clones (MY348 and MY343) established at the turn of the millennium.

'The older vines give about four tons per hectare. They take a while to get phenolic ripeness. They're just sort of creeping along, actually. We should have replaced them by now. But they give us the structure we want, also a plummy, forest-floor character. The newer French clones are vigorous growers. It's one of the traits that make Merlot a bit of a handful. The wines have quite a herbaceous character. They can be pretty powerful on their own. So a blend of the two works really well.'

The harvest comes to 250 tons 'in a good year!' Some 90 to 100 of that goes towards their own wines, 'but we're currently doing about 60 tons'. The 'top stuff' among the reds (Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon) goes towards their Capensis Reserve.

The Marklews replant a vineyard every year, as much to refresh

as to maintain that sought-after equal ratio between young and mature vines.

'It's a balancing act,' states Bill firmly. Especially as winemaker Duan Brits believes in picking on phenolic ripeness, tested by tasting the grapes, as opposed to degrees Balling indicating grape sugar development. For the quiet, deeply sun-browned winemaker knows these vineyards well.

He came on board in 2003, making the Marklews' maiden vintage in a 180-year-old building that had last been used as a cellar some 60 years before. Despite a small budget and no desire to build anything ostentatious, they were able to call on a friend of their parents, winery architect Johan Wessels (who designed the Graham Beck cellars in Robertson and Franschoek). In keeping with the historic but homely 18th-century Cape Georgian house (with Bill and his young family now in residence) and the hands-on, teamwork approach of the Marklews and their winemaker, the original pitched iron-roofed cellar simply had its yellowwood beams shored up, old cement tanks bashed out for barrel space and a flat-roofed extension built for fermentation and storage.

'We did end up, though, being guinea pigs for a new combi-concrete tank design that Johan had seen overseas and wanted to try. They're the only ones in the Cape. They cost a whack but we love them!' says Haidee, with Duan nodding in gleaming-eyed agreement. They're four squat, split-level, floor-to-ceiling, steel-reinforced-concrete tanks with the tops opening up through a heavy steel lid onto the flat roof.

Grapes – hand-sorted and 'bruised' in a gentle crush – are tipped into the top half of the tank where they undergo a cold soak over a few days for colour and flavour extraction before fermentation is started. The 'cap' is manually punched down standing on the roof. From there the wine is gravitationally piped through portals from the upper level to the lower half of the tank to settle, before gently pumping into barrel for malolactic fermentation, racked several times and then barrel-matured for between 12 and 18 months.

Duan and the Marklews believe in 'soft' wooding. They use 300-litre barrels, some new (10 to 12%) but mostly second- to fourth-fill, and have found their wines do best in Vicard, Demptos and Nadalie. 'Barrel choice is one of the most important things,' agree Bill and Duan. 'Before we found the right type, we still had to fine the wine with egg-whites; now no longer.'

They use little sulphur; a touch of tartaric acid. 'We're borderline organic,' reckons Duan. But then good hygiene is imperative. 'We send our barrels away to be cleaned and sterilised before reusing.'

The Marklew Merlot 2011, though not vinified by Duan, was under his care through the barrel nurturing period. This laid-back but hardworking winemaker, who had previously been at nearby Muratie and, before that, racked up some 15 harvests in the USA, Germany and France over the space of four years, had taken a hiatus from winemaking in 2007. Indulging his love of the great outdoors, he moved to the Karoo to become a professional hunter and start a venison business. But the needs of his young son brought him back to the winelands and, happily for all parties, back to the Marklews who had been doing vineyard and cellar duty alongside several itinerant winemakers.

It remains an all-hands-on-deck enterprise. The thumbprint (Haidee's) on both wine bottle back labels and box packaging is no creative gimmick: 'We love what we do, which is why we do it all ourselves. But we also love to live our lives here,' confides Haidee, an avid horsewoman whose home lies on the dam across from the main house and winery. She also handles marketing, sales and distribution, which includes exports and, besides Norman Goodfellows, strictly on-trade listings in some of SA's top hotels, eateries and boardrooms.

It's why tastings and wine sales on the farm are by appointment: 'So that one of us is here to welcome visitors, and not out in the vineyards, in the cellar, on a horse, fishing on the dam, or somewhere on a bike.'

Sterhuis Merlot 2008

The name Sterhuis ('star house') is no misnomer, nor any form of self-aggrandisement or expression of lofty achievement. One knows this after a rollicking ride up into the vineyards on Stellenbosch's seemingly gently undulating Bottelary Hills. High-energy yet self-effacing winemaker Johan Kruger is at the wheel of his bakkie talking nineteen-to-the-dozen about another 'crazy!' day in the winelands while trying not to run over his following retinue of dogs: two scurrying Jack Russells and a gangling adolescent Weimaraner.

What seems undulating from a distance transforms into near vertical slopes, negotiated at times with white-knuckle-steep drop-offs as the eroded dirt track hugs the contours of the vineyards (interspersed with patches of fragrant fynbos, home to grape-nibbling small steenbuck).

These rise up from between 220 to 450 metres above sea level, making Sterhuis the highest farm on these hills, occupied by several other leading Cape wine farms, from Hartenberg to the north and Kaapzicht to the south. The temperature on a hot summer's day a week or so before the 2014 harvest becomes notably cooler, which is the main reason for this spontaneous excursion.

It's not to show off the magnificent 180-degree vista encompassing vine-clad hillsides leading down to Cape Town's northern suburban sprawl right across to flat-topped Table Mountain. It was from there that early Cape colonists in the 17th century observed the evening star Venus rising above the hill on which the original old farmhouse stood, and named it Sterhuis.

The vineyards were established here by Johan's father André, a lawyer who bought the farm in 1980 as a 'retirement investment'. Pine tree copses and some fynbos made way for classic white and red varieties on a range of aspects on the mainly west-facing 100-hectare property.

Grapes from some 40 hectares of vines went, and still do go, to Douglas Green Bellingham and, more recently, Fredericksburg (home farm of Rupert & Rothschild wines). Chenin Blanc bush vines are the oldest at over three decades, followed by Pinotage and Sauvignon Blanc. Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot came later.

Despite a wine farm in the family, Johan, schooled in suburban Durbanville, did not entertain thoughts of winemaking as a career. A 'gap' year spent odd-jobbing in the US in 1998 brought no greater clarity, so his father suggested a stint working the vineyards on the farm. He was invited by dynamic duo Gary and Kathy Jordan of Jordan (just over the next ridge) to help in their cellar in 2000 and in 2002 was put in charge.

At the same time, he started vinifying some choice Sterhuis grapes (using rented cellar space). And, although having fallen in love with Chardonnay and promptly walking away with the 2005 Diners Club Young Winemaker of the Year award for his maiden Sterhuis Barrel Selection Chardonnay 2004 - 'it's still probably our main performer and my and my dad's passion' - it all began with Merlot, the first wine made under the Sterhuis label in 2002.

The bakkie tilts, jerks and scrabbles its way up past the Merlot vines as Johan rattles off the details. Mostly Italian clone, planted about 20 years ago, which gives a spicier character. Some French clone. The vineyard is west-facing, planted in rows running north-south. The mild morning sun brings out black olive and spicy fruit on the east-facing bunches, a spiciness unusual in Merlot that he highlights as being distinctive of Sterhuis. The hot afternoon sun on the west-facing bunches produces more plummy fruit.

Soils are decomposed granite with a quartzite component 'that lends a minerality running like a thread, a seam through all the Sterhuis wines'. Grapes are cold-soaked for a week. He prefers pump-overs to punch-downs. He's decreased the amount of new wood over the years - now at just 30% - and alcohols have come down to below 14%. He aims for 'gentler, more drinkable wines; one wants to drink the whole bottle!'

While Chardonnay consistently steals the limelight, he reckons Merlot occupies second spot in the Sterhuis firmament. The maiden 2002 flew SAA. But it's also the 'workhorse' variety among the reds (Sauvignon Blanc does duty as such among the whites), despite comprising just 12% of vineyard space.

'I drank a bottle of the 2002 the other day and it was still damn good. The minerality we get here results in naturally higher acidity and lower pH levels, which gives longevity.' Although building their own cellar has been mooted, he will continue to use the facilities at Allée Bleu in Franschhoek. 'It works well; we have a nice relationship.' And, as evidenced in the way he tackles the Kruger farm's steep terroir, 'just to give you a feel for the vineyards', the man certainly has the energy to cope with the travelling involved. As the Sterhuis motto, inscribed on the label, says: *non est ad astra molli e terris via* (there is no easy way from the earth to the stars). But Johan is relishing the ride. ♦



Johan Kruger,
winemaker at Sterhuis.