A man in a blue polo shirt and khaki shorts is looking through a large, gold-colored telescope mounted on a silver tripod. The scene is set outdoors at dusk or dawn, with a soft orange and blue sky and silhouettes of trees in the background. The man is looking upwards and to the left, focused on the telescope.

Johan Kruger has been named
Diners Club Young Winemaker of the Year
for his Sterhuis Barrel Selection Chardonnay 2004.
Joanne Simon meets a man at one with his universe.

Written in the
stars



“If an astrologer had predicted a career in winemaking as recently as seven years ago, Kruger would have called him or her a lunatic.”

In November, the largest optical telescope in the southern hemisphere was officially opened at the South African Astronomical Observatory in the Karoo town of Sutherland. In November, Johan Kruger was named Diners Club Young Winemaker of the Year for his Sterhuis Barrel Selection Chardonnay 2004. And what links these two auspicious events? More than you might think...

For starters, Sterhuis – the name of the farm Kruger’s father André, a lawyer, bought as opposed to investing in a retirement plan in 1980 – means “house of stars” (it seems the evening star rises behind the farm, which is situated on the highest of all the Bottelary hills near Stellenbosch). Then there’s the fact that Kruger only managed to take three week-ends off all year, juggling his position as winemaker at Durbanville estate Die-mersdal with his labour of love at Sterhuis Wines. And where did he go for these precious breaks? Sutherland, of all places. “I just go there to watch the stars – if I can stay awake long enough, that is! It’s as though you can almost touch them...”

The dry, clear weather (it falls between summer and winter rainfall areas), high altitude (1 800 metres) and lack of light pollution (aided by astronomy-friendly street lights) explain why it’s a stargazer’s paradise. But Kruger’s interest in Sutherland doesn’t end there. His ultimate dream

is to plant Chardonnay near the town also famous for being the coldest place on winter weather forecasts. “Vines under those crystal-clear skies, where there’s no pollution, not even noise pollution... They’ve just got to produce great wines!”

It seems Bottelary neighbour Kosie Steenkamp of Groenland already farms table grapes 30km from Sutherland. “They are healthier than the healthiest vineyards here, and he doesn’t have to spray them at all!”

And that’s important, because Kruger plans to go completely biodynamic one day, having already started to implement certain principles in the cellar. “I don’t want people think I’m *gepla met die maan* or anything, but I truly believe that rolling the barrels of Chardonnay at full moon, for example, makes the lees settle faster. There’s also more energy, which makes the lees influence more intense.”

The first time he did it was for the Chardonnay 2004, and it seems to have worked. First up was a gold medal at the 2005 Swiss International Airline Wine Awards (“and our Chardonnay comes from the old Swiss clone, so that was a nice coincidence”). Then the wine scored an impressive 4½ Stars in WINE magazine – and not once but twice (in the June and November issues). And now, to top it all, the wine has beaten off stiff competition from 42 other entries to win Kruger

the prestigious Young Winemaker of the Year title – and a R5 000 cash prize.

It’s no wonder the 30-year-old has stars in his eyes. But if an astrologer had predicted a career in winemaking as recently as seven years ago, Kruger would have called him or her a lunatic.

After growing up and attending school in Durbanville, he says he “didn’t have a clue” what he wanted to do with his life. In 1998, after a working holiday in the States (“doing furniture removals and all sorts of things”), his father suggested that he spend some time working on the 112ha farm, which sold its grapes (and still does) to DGB. A cousin recently reminded him of the time they stood together on the crest of the ridge above Sterhuis’s 35-year-old Chenin Blanc block at 450m above sea-level, with vineyards sprawling down the north, west, east and even south slopes into the Bottelary valley 250m below, only for Kruger to shrug his shoulders and say: “What must I do with all this?”

The last thing he expected was to become totally passionate about viticulture. As for actually making wine? “At the end of 2000, Gary and Kathy Jordan invited me to spend the harvest at Jordan. I took one look at all those tanks, pipes and barrels and thought how could one not have fun doing this?”

He had so much fun that he eagerly accepted an assistant winemaker position at Jordan a few months later, eventually taking the reins as winemaker in 2002 – an amazing achievement for someone without any formal qualifications. “I had on the job training” he quips. “I don’t

make wine out of a science book. I just trust my gut and so far it hasn't let me down."

It certainly didn't let him down in developing Jordan's highly acclaimed Nine Yards Chardonnay ("my baby") and no one showed any surprise when he was appointed winemaker at Diemersdal in late 2004. "It is only a pleasure to work for the Louw family and things are going really well there too," he says. "2005 was a fantastic vintage for us, resulting in nice, powdery tannins on the reds, and good fruit intensity on all the wines. The Chardonnay is already showing incredible character."

Ah, yes, Chardonnay. It doesn't take long for Kruger to return to his favourite subject. At Sterhuis, he may also make a Sauvignon Blanc (both the 2004 and 2005 vintages scored 4 Stars in WINE, November 2005), a Chenin Blanc (the maiden 2005 is as yet unrated but a remarkably complex wine – no wonder Chenin specialist Bruwer Raats buys their fruit), a Merlot (significantly, Kruger's 2003 placed among the top 10 in this year's Diners Club Winemaker of the Year Awards), as well as a Cabernet Sauvignon and Cab-Merlot blend that have just been bottled (from the 2004 vintage). But Chardonnay is his real passion.

"I could talk about the Sterhuis 2004 all night," he says. "The vineyard was planted in 1986 and it's been a financial loss because the vines have never performed, yield-wise. We only get between 2½ and 4 tons/ha and the tiny berries fascinate me because they turn so yellow! When you walk through the vineyards and taste the grapes, they have a butterscotchy taste, and a dense honeyed structure, which was precisely what we needed in 2004 when we used new barrels for the first time."

The grapes were whole-bunch pressed, slow-fermented and then left to mature in barrel for a further 10 months. "Then I




Kruger calls this Chardonnay vineyard "mini Burgundy".

just gave it a light racking and filtration before bottling. That was it! I'm just disappointed we didn't make more of it..."

Only 13 barrels were produced – "not an unlucky number for us!" – and the wine, at just R65 a bottle, is now understandably hard to come by. All of Sterhuis's wines, believes Kruger, are very well priced for their quality, with the Sauvignon Blanc costing R45 a bottle, the Chenin R55 and the Merlot R70. "Our new Bordeaux blend will probably be over R100 a bottle, but even that's not bad considering it'll probably be in the same league as wines costing R150–200 a bottle."

There's just one thing missing in the Sterhuis range, says Kruger, and that's a Méthode Cap Classique. "Next to Chardonnay, bubbly is what I'm most passionate about, so I'm trying to persuade my dad that we need to make one next year, even if it's just five barrels."

In the meantime, he has already made 1 200 bottles of MCC at Diemersdal. "Over five years, we're going to disgorge a couple of hundred bottles every few months – can you imagine how much complexity that last disgorgement is going to have?"

I for one look forward to tasting it, or rather – as that first Champagne producer Dom Perignon so famously put it – to tasting the stars. 

JOHAN KRUGER FACT FILE

- Kruger is married to Toinette, a trained chef and product developer at Woolworths.
- His favourite wine at the moment is the 1996 Jordan Chardonnay ("made in the days when I was still drinking beer and brandy!").
- He describes the Sterhuis Barrel Selection Chardonnay 2004 as follows: "Crème brûlée on the nose also coats the mouth, where ripe tropical flavours are interwoven into one big mouthful of intensity. A full-bodied wine but not heavy, thanks to citrus/lime acidity and an almost Burgundian minerality coming through." He's confident it will age well for at least another five years, and recommends serving it with cheese ("the more potent the better!") or with salmon, seared tuna or sushi.
- On hearing that he is this year's Diners Club Young Winemaker of the Year: "Thanks to my dad for the fruit and the opportunity to make great wine."
- His winemaking philosophy: "Wine's a lifestyle, not a job – at least if you want to be successful!"
- For an appointment to visit Sterhuis, call 083 411 0757 or email sterhuis@intekom.co.za.