

# BREAKING GROUND

by Rosemary Mantini

## **THE SOUTH AFRICAN WINE INDUSTRY HAS BEEN ON SOMETHING OF A MISSION OVER THE LAST 21 YEARS.**

Beginning in 1994 with the birth of democracy and the rise of a new idea called sustainability ethics, South African winemakers have been showing the rest of the world what it means to tend to the environment, economy and community as a whole, in positive and profitable ways. “As far as we are aware,” reveals Jackie Olivier, global marketing manager of Two Oceans Wines, “South Africa has the only industry-wide initiative of this kind amongst wine-producing nations and it is certainly a significant competitive advantage, helping to build our reputation and credentials.”

Most of us judge wine by the joy it can bring to our palates. Certainly Estelle Lourens, winemaker at Uitkyk Wine Estate, encourages us to do that. “For me, it’s important to give people the wine that they want,” she says, “and to love what they’re tasting. It doesn’t have to be the best quality wine or the most expensive, as long as you love the wine that you drink.” Lourens makes it sound so simple. There is, in fact, a whole lot more going on back at the farm.

## ECO-SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable environmental practices are, relatively speaking, the easy part of the sustainability ethics equation. Many South African wineries have abandoned the use of toxic chemical fertilizers or pesticides in favour of natural alternatives. “When we farm,” explains Lourens, “it’s a huge impact on nature. We are really working the land, and have been doing so for many years, and now it’s time for us to really get back to how it was before.” Large-scale agriculture can crowd out native plant and animal species leaving a landscape that is unable to keep itself healthy. Since Uitkyk sits on 600 Ha of farmland, one of the initiatives among other conservation projects that Lourens and her team implemented was to set aside over 300 Ha to encourage the return of the threatened Silver Tree. “Nature makes its own way back. You can see more bird life coming back to the farm in lots of different ways and we’re doing quite a bit to enhance that.” Along with tree plantings, Uitkyk has also created a habitat for owls. These birds of prey offer a side benefit to the farm, too. They keep the rodent population under control!

I have to admit that apart from perhaps irrigating the vines, I never thought about how much water wineries actually use. According to Olivier, it’s a lot. In a land known for drought, she says, managing water usage is paramount. A staggering supply of wastewater is generated during the crush to wash the grapes and to clean out winemaking equipment. Wineries across the country have addressed this problem head on. Albert Gerber, managing director at Durbanville Hills, tells me that his was one of the first wineries to install its own water treatment system.

That lovely beverage we enjoy not only impacts land and water use, but also the air we breathe. A considerable amount of carbon dioxide is released into the environment during fermentation. To counter that, Durbanville Hills has planted “six hectares of olive trees to assist with the conversion of carbon dioxide to oxygen. ... The orchards are leased to an olive-farming specialist in the area who produces high-quality extra-virgin oil.”

### **DURBANVILLE HILLS SAUVIGNON BLANC 2013, CAPE TOWN (\$12)**

Pretty pale colour with an enticing bouquet of apricot, peach, tropical fruit, vanilla and an undertone of almonds. Tastes like summer fruit, grilled peaches and green apple with a refreshing citrus finish.

### **FLAT ROOF MANOR MERLOT 2013, STELLEN- BOSCH (\$12)**

Grown on the Uitkyk Wine Estate, this wine has aromas of soft summer berries, sandalwood and bell pepper with a hint of tar. On the palate, this merlot tastes of green pepper, ripe black cherries with a touch of barnyard.

### **TWO OCEANS CABERNET SAUVIGNON/ MERLOT 2013, WESTERN CAPE (\$12)**

Shows a rich bouquet of dark plum, cherry, summer berries and liquorice. On the palate, this wine shines with cherries, spice and beetroot.

## ECONOMY

“South Africa had a lot of catching up to do after years of economic isolation,” Olivier admits. “Before re-entering world trade, our industry had a long, hard look at our strengths and weaknesses, and what we needed to do to become a viable competitor in the global market. With growing numbers of consumers around the world wanting assurances that the goods they buy are made according to sustainable principles, this places South Africa in a strong position. Two Oceans itself is the leading sponsor of an eco-cultural annual festival in the seaside town of Hermanus in the Western Cape, [which] has become an important economic stimulus for the town and a major driver of tourism.”

The South African wine industry is integral to the country’s economic health. On a local scale, many wineries have become important opportunity incubators through job creation — more than 275,000 jobs, directly and indirectly, are sustained by the industry according to Olivier — and initiatives aimed at directing wealth to local families and the communities in which they live.



**Flat Roof Manor’s Estelle Lourens**

## SOCIAL EQUITY

To that end, Durbanville Hills donates 100 percent of the money generated from its olive oil sales, and a percentage of the selling price of each bottle of wine, to its employees via the social arm of the winery called The Durbanville Hills Workers’ Trust. The winery and its community partners have also established a teacher-run daycare on the farm, funded under-resourced community schools and instituted life skills programs for adults.

Olivier reports, “we support a broad spectrum of cultural outreach, life skills, youth support and job creation programs.” Lourens neatly sums up the industry’s efforts towards social equity like this: “For everybody, that’s a huge concern because there’s been a lot of bad publicity for a long time about the South African industry. But I think it’s all about our responsibility to take care of the people who are working for us. It’s one of our big efforts. The people who are working for us are knowledgeable about what they are doing because some of those people have been

working with us for many, many, many years. It’s our responsibility to take care of them and to make sure that they have a future on the farm, [and that they and their children have] opportunities for advancement.”

I suspect that rolling out the kind of changes required by a concept like sustainability ethics is no easy task. Lourens confirms it. “[It’s been] definitely positive for us because it shows commitment from both sides — the workers as well as management — to create a system where everybody is really looking out for each other. ... Lots was put into this and we need to get the word out. This is important to us. People should really buy into the system when they look for what types of wine to buy.”



**Albert Gerber from Durbanville Hills**

## DRINK WINE AND FEEL GOOD ABOUT IT, TOO

There are a number of ways that we can support wineries in their efforts to make meaningful improvements to the environment and the communities in which they operate. Here is a partial list of accreditations that ethically sustainable wineries have been awarded. Look for them on the bottle. Or, check out the Ethical Trade link on the Wines of South Africa website for more information.

**ISO 14000:** This is an international environmental management standard that assists organizations in improving their overall footprint.

**IPW:** The Integrated Production of Wine accreditation requires members to employ environmentally-friendly grape growing, cellar and harvesting methods, as well as proper grape transportation and waste management.

**WIETA:** The Wine Industry Ethical Trade Association provides training, technical assessment and audits to determine members’ compliance.

**BWI:** The Biodiversity and Wine Initiative is a partnership between the wine industry and conservation groups. ✦