

Marianne Wines and the French Connection

By Dave March CWM

www.wine.co.za 13th June 2017

There is a little bit of France in South Africa which isn't in Franschoek.

Marianne Wines lies in the shadows of the Simonsberg between Paarl and Stellenbosch, and a visit would make any Francophile feel right at home.

The French connection is real and many of the people at the winery are French. Indeed, 'Marianne' was born from the essence of the French Republic, it being a term used to describe the soul and face of the emerging Republic after the 1789 Revolution. 'Marianne' came to represent Liberty and Reason and was often portrayed as a strong and heroic young woman. New York's Statue of Liberty is a representation.

French owner Christian Dauriac is immersed in the wine business, owning two St Emilion châteaux, including Grand Cru Classé Château Destieux as well as Château La Clémence in Pomerol. Christian intended the 17 hectares of vineyard to produce wines in the French style, showing structure, pliable tannins and elegance, and thought that this would combine well with New World terroir. He works closely with his superstar consultant friend Michel Rolland who has consulted for Marianne since its beginning and the two regularly discuss progress with new winemaker Jos van Wyk – who did two vintages in Bordeaux before joining Marianne in 2016 and is more French than many I suspect. Frenchman Thierry Harberer joined as a consultant at the same time. The last two vintages have been supported by not only Michel Rolland, but also Guillaume Dussans from Bordeaux. French connection indeed.

Marianne Wine Estate is a boutique winery, producing fewer than 100,000 bottles a year, yet offers nine Estate wines. These are garagiste wines almost, with yields below 35hl per hectare, hand harvested, twice sorted berries, natural ferments, delestage (complete removal and return) for greater extraction and red wines seeing 18 to 24 months in new and used French oak then held three years before release. It also brings in grapes to supply export markets in China, Brazil, Holland and elsewhere under different labels, but its core is the premium releases and Sales Manager Tom has worked to grow its profile in South Africa, reducing its proportion exported dramatically from an initial 90%. They now see some 2000 people a month visiting the tasting room, and reached 6th on Trip Advisor for winelands visit recommendations.

Other than being more likely to hear French spoken than anything else, what sets Marianne apart is that for most wines three and often four earlier vintages are available for purchase.

Tasting Sauvignon Blanc – aged for 9 months in 40% new Acacia barrels - Tom poured the 2016, 2015 and 2011 for me. The 2015 was favourite, but the 2011 was still vibrant. He also poured three vintages of the Cape Blend, a savoury, red berry and game 2008, a 2011 and a lovely 2014 which was full of lush plum and vanilla. Then came four vintages of Pinotage; the 2005 showing its age, a juicier, crowd pleasing 2012, a serene 2014 and a seductive 2015, dense, layered and 92/100 points. Despite the wine splattered table and the growing number of tasters (well, Jos wasn't going to walk away and three tasting staff - two French *naturellement* - pulled up chairs) four vintages of Merlot followed.

The 2013 and 2015 outscored the 2012 and 2014 for me, the youngest showing ripe fruit, soft tannins and nice mouthfeel. Just one vintage of the Shiraz 2013 and Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 followed, but they were overshadowed by the flagship wines, the Desirade and Floreal.

The Desirade (desire) is a Merlot dominated Bordeaux blend, a nod to Christian's St Emilion. The 2013 was fine and elegant, a lighter style, the 2012 was deeper, fuller and more sumptuous. Their top wine, Floreal ('the month of flowers' and comprising Cabernet, Merlot and Shiraz) was the wine served at Buckingham Palace for the Queen and Nelson Mandela for his 90th birthday. The Shiraz inclusion is still in tune with Marianne's French core, many believe Shiraz once was commonly found in Bordeaux.

Marianne always hold small parcels of stock back, so despite its small production there are five vintages of Floreal available at the winery. The 2007 is, in fact, Marianne's best-selling wine. The latest release 2013 sells for R370 and offers fruity red berry forest floor notes, the 2009 a tomato-leaf and Ceylon tea lighter style, the 2007 had silky tannins, intensity and length, but the 2004 blew my socks off. At R1000 this 2004 Madiba 'liquid history' bottle, is a great deal. The 15.5% alcohol is invisible, the fruit is subtle, silky and layered. This is a sensuous and distinguished wine, structured and so long, a classic and 96/100.

After tasting 23 wines I felt I had abused their generosity enough and left with a renewed *Joie de vivre*. If you fancy an afternoon of Baguettes and Brie with a good Bordeaux then Marianne Wines won't disappoint.