

PROFILE: WHITE WINE MAKER, FRANCOIS WEICH

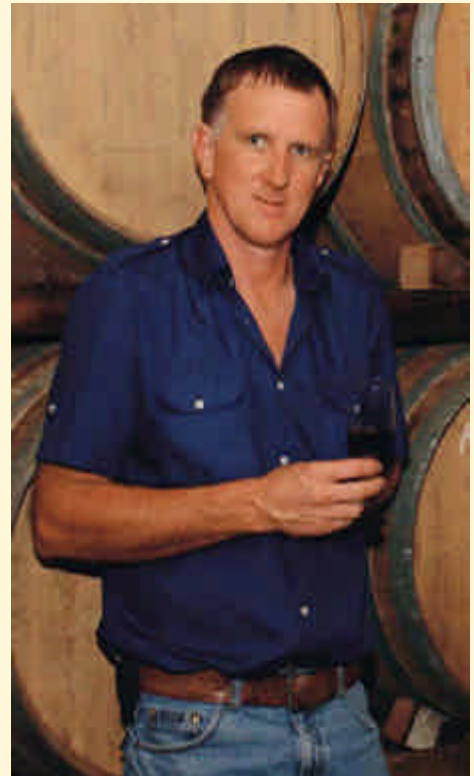
The fact that Francois was considering engineering as a career before he settled on winemaking gives some indication of his personality, and where he fits into the Robertson Winery family.

"I love the mechanics of winemaking," explains Francois. "I get great satisfaction out of putting the wine through its paces, watching it develop from crusher, to tank, barrel and bottling. I've also been blessed with a great team of cellar workers, some of whom have been here even longer than I have. We work well together and have a good routine going."

Francois grew up in Swellendam, studied at Elsenburg, and learnt the ropes at Rooiberg, Mamreweg and Vredendal (in that order) before joining Robertson Winery in 1997. Today he is in charge of 12 million litres of wine and often works long hours to get the wine to the level of quality Robertson Winery deserves.

"People think that the harvest is the most stressful time at the cellar," he says, "But for me it comes after the harvest is over and the marketing people start looking for samples, and pushing to get the next vintage released, that's when it gets tense. But I enjoy it."

CEO Bowen Botha describes Francois as a dedicated winemaker, and a loyal member of the Robertson Winery family: "He prefers to work behind the scenes, but he is thorough and very capable. Francois has been instrumental in growing the Robertson Winery brand by consistently producing the style and quality that has developed Robertson Winery into one of South Africa's leading brands."



ANOTHER FIRST FOR ROBERTSON WINERY



Robertson Winery is the first cellar in the southern hemisphere to achieve the highly acclaimed ISO22000 stamp of approval. According to Anton Cilliers, Financial Director, Robertson Winery has been accredited for ISO9001 and HACCAP for some time. However, this new standard not only combines both the quality systems management from ISO with the food safety management of HACCAP, but also takes it a step further.

For example, ISO22000 makes sure that the cellar is prepared for any emergency. Power blackouts, strikes, fires and sabotage are all covered as well as things like improved communication channels between the producer and both the client and supplier. For the consumer, all these measures simply translate into consistent quality of both product and service, and that's reassuring.

WACKY WINE WEEKEND WRAP-UP

By all accounts the annual Wacky Wine Weekend held in June was a runaway success. This year Robertson Winery's participation included the Miles of Smiles Half Marathon, the Mountain Biking Event, and the National Strong Man Competition.

ROBERTSON WINERY STRONG MAN COMPETITION

Cellar Technical Manager, Hans Lizemore organised the Strong Man Competition which really drew the crowds. He co-opted South Africa's strong man guru Chris Batts into bringing down several of South Africa's strongest men including South Africa's no. 1 Etienne Smit, who was recently also ranked no.2 in the world!

"Because we are a winery, we decided to make all the weights in barrels," explained Hans. The competition was given national accreditation so three of the events counted towards national ranking:

- 1) Pulling the cellar's truck, which weighs 18 tons and has 12 wheels.
- 2) Picking up 2 wine barrels at once, each weighing 200kg, and walking 30m.
- 3) The circle walk, which entailed picking up a 400kg barrel and walking in a circle around a fixed point.

The best of our local talent was Robertson Winery truck driver, Ferdi Venter, but admittedly he couldn't come anywhere close to SA's national champion.

Of the 'fun' events, the most popular was probably when each of the Strong Men loaded some children into an old Datsun 1400 bakkie (Nissan pick-up) and walked around with it as though it was a wheelbarrow.

All the participants visited the local schools the day before the competition, not only showing off their prowess, but also bringing across their "Don't do drugs" message. "I know many kids have been inspired by these guys," says Hans, "we'll definitely have to organise something similar next year."

ROBERTSON WINERY MTB CHALLENGE REPORT

Enthusiastic participant, Japie Swanepoel, had this to say:

This funride on Sunday was absolutely great! Everything from the venue to the route, markings and terrain made it a great ride. We started at the Paru farm, about 10km outside Robertson on the McGregor road. Although the sky was cloudless and the sun was shining, the weather at the start was just great for mountain biking. Within 5km of the start, we were faced with a very steep and sandy and rocky single-track uphill. I guess I could've cycled it, if it wasn't for the "congestion" on the track.

From there followed a great downhill and then about 20km of riding through the karoo bush. Although it wasn't quite single track, most of the route seems to have been cut just for the event. It made for great MTB riding with everything from water crossings to dongas, potholes and protruding rocks. The route was clearly marked and signs explaining where there were donga's, potholes, sharp corners, slippery surfaces and steep downhills were indicated throughout the entire route.



The second 20km took us through the town of McGregor and then onto a dirt road about 3 km out of town. This section was a wide and well-compacted dirt road. Although not as exciting as riding in the bush, it was still pleasant as it was relatively fast. The last 20km was off road again with even more technical sections of donga type roads, very rocky downhill and a number of sharp turns. This was however the most enjoyable section of the ride for me.

As we came into the finish we could see the WP cross country riders doing their thing. The 5th WP XC event was held at the same venue yesterday. They did the lap thing of course, 9km of it.

All finishers of the fun ride received a bottle of Robertson Winery red wine. There was plenty of food and wine for sale and they had set up umbrellas with hay bales on the banks of the Breede River, right there at the finish.

Well done to the organizers, sponsors and volunteers. I will do this one again.

Barry's comment: "Special thanks to Liz and Rupert De Vries from the Phanto Ridge vineyard for hosting the event. Also thanks to the other Robertson Winery farmers in the area for allowing all riders the privilege of cycling through the vineyards, and being in touch with nature."

"Proceeds of the MTB event were donated to the 'Herberg Kinderhuis' the local orphanage. A big thank you to the Vryburgers for being so instrumental in the organization and for passing funds on to the Herberg."



IN THE VINEYARDS



Viticulturist Briaan Stipp is very happy with the winter season so far. The peaks of the surrounding mountains are covered in snow, confirming that the vines have had enough cold units to go dormant and therefore renew their vigour for the coming season.

And the Breede River is flowing strongly, a good indication that sufficient rain has fallen in the catchment area to replenish the water table.

The farmers have all been busy pruning their vines, and some have been planting.

"We are not planting more vines," explains Briaan, "but some farmers are replacing old vines with Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon and some Tanat, a grape that is only used in blending as it contributes both colour and acid."

WINE LOVERS GET THE RIDE OF THEIR LIVES

Three lucky couples won a competition advertised across all the Robertson Winery brands. One the lucky 6 happened to be a journalist, Joubert Malherbe along with his wife Fazila, and was inspired enough to write this complementary article about their trip in his local rag:

Keeping track, staying on the rails wit' dem good ol' Blues. There is this Roy Harper song that goes, in part: "I ride inside the purple dawn/collecting golden dew/that falls from citadels of time/I shake while flying through/creation's key is just in reach ... aah ... but then it's overdue/and as darkness surrounds us/I'm reaching for you."

It was wholly inappropriate, but this was precisely the line that came into my head when I was on a flight back from Cape Town on Easter Friday. Inappropriate since it was nowhere near dawn (it was, in fact, mid-afternoon), there was no dew around and the only thing resembling citadels were the magnificent cloud formations among which we were flying.

I had tackled the arduous trip down south on the Monday before. Or rather, it could have been arduous, except that my wife and I were on board the Blue Train - honest. Lady luck had shone upon us courtesy of the good folk at Robertson Wineries. I had purchased some goodies from said firm - including spices and a flagon of Bacchus's best - last year sometime.

A coupon was attached to said flagon, inviting imbibers to chance their luck by SMSing (or texting) the last four digits of the bar code, along with your name to a given number. Well, about a month or so later I got a call from Ankia Coetzer and she said that I had, in fact, won. "Your name was the second drawn out of 20 000 or so entries." I said: "Pull the other one, what's the catch".

No, no catch, Ankia said and she sent me the details. The upshot of it was that with the help of ace Cape Town travel agent Eben Nel, the trip on Africa's very own Orient Express was organised (along with car hire, accommodation and the flight back). And yes, the Blue Train is all it is made out to be - as was expounded on these very pages by our own Zelda Venter a few weeks ago.



You are pampered from the moment you get on board - even before; to wit, whiling away our time in the Blue Train lounge at Pretoria station before departing, a be-capped geezer came and said to me "hot towel sir?" I said: "No thanks man; but I will have a black coffee with a glass of cold, fresh water" - and he obliged.

We met a couple from Birmingham, Ken and Liz Flood, on the train and we sort of hung out together, sharing a table, swapping Monty Python anecdotes (they were also aficionados, "if you know what I mean"). Ken and I also had a discussion about the late lamented Nick Drake. Food and drink is free on the train and at one point old Ken - watching as the waiter decanted yet more sparkling wine for his delectation - said that after that glass, he may as well start taking it intravenously.

We stopped off at Kimberley for a tour of the town and the mine after which it was dinnertime on the train. In time-honoured fashion and as is required, I put on a tie for the occasion and was ribbed for the pathetic knot I tied. Still, all in jest. Far from being stuffy, I actually found my fellow passengers to be a friendly bunch - I mean, one guy who overheard our dinner table chat with the Brummies, upon leaving the dining car stopped at the table and asked who my favourite guitarist was. I told him Keith Richards, which I think left him a bit non-plussed as he said his was definitely Eric Clapton.

The trip though the Worcester area and the winelands in the early morning was also breathtaking. We really do have a beautiful country, but the one thing blighting it is the railside litter. It really is a problem of disgraceful proportions. There's tons and tons of it - more so in the urban areas, but even in remote rural parts. Not good.

Then it was on to fairest Cape Town. With its mountain, its beaches, the quaint Fish Hoek and Kalk Bay - including the exquisite Brass Bell - and the beauty of Kirstenbosch (where we bumped into Ken and Liz again - he had by then located his fountain pen and had his driver's licence couriered to him, much to Liz's relief).

We took in Robben Island, which in itself is an experience - the fortitude of the old struggle heroes is sure something to be admired. The crossing coming back was a bit rough though; ag shame! My old mate Angus reckons Cape Town is a bit like "Centurion by the sea". I know what he means. But I reckon it has a lot to offer. Still, it is good to be back in funky Doringkloof - in Centurion ... "by the lake".

Other lucky winners were:

- Richard and Linda Carstens
- Imtiaz and Nesha Emmammelly