

ESTABLISHED 1941

ROBERTSON WINERY



SMALL TOWN, BIG HEART.

NEWSLETTER - FEBRUARY 2005

FOCUS ON: BRAD GOLD

Don't be misled by the fresh-faced, designer-clad, smooth-talking new Export Sales Manager at Robertson Winery, for beneath that squeaky clean image lies someone that is passionate about wine and prepared to get his hands dirty to get closer to his product.

"I can't sell something I'm not passionate about. And I can't get passionate about the wine if I haven't been a part of making it," says Brad Gold (24), "that's why the next time you'll see me I'll probably be in the cellar."

He might be young but Brad has earned his colours the hard way. No fancy marketing degree or smart connections in the wine industry handed him his job on a silver platter. In fact, Brad grew up in Durban and was schooled in Pretoria where he mixed with surfer dudes rather than 'boerseuns' (farm boys). After school he backpacked down the coast in search of adventure and ended up as a waiter in a top Knysna restaurant.

Brad explains: "We got commission on the wines we sold so I would obviously earn much more money selling a R250 bottle than a R25 bottle, and to sell those high-priced wines, I had to find out why they were so good." This sparked the start of Brad's wine career, resulting in a quick succession of wine courses and a job as Marketing Manager at L'Avenir Estate outside Stellenbosch.



"L'Avenir was a good place to start," he continues, "as I had to be jack of all trades and really get to know the entire wine business. But the scope here at Robertson Winery is so much bigger, not only because we are dealing with much more wine and many more wines, but we deal across the spectrum from box wine to top end wines that each require a totally different approach and marketing strategy - this is going to be a huge learning curve for me and I'm ready for it."

Brad started his job in early December last year and was catapulted into the fray with a quick trip to London. He's been behind his desk since then but will be heading off to Canada for the month of March to look up old customers and investigate some new ones. Then he'll be in and out the country for most of the year, which should make getting in his Cape Wine Master thesis, due in July, a tad tricky. "Guess I won't have much time to surf this year," he grins.

THE MOUNTAIN COMES TO MOHAMMED, or the other way around??

How many wine importers ever visit their principles? Perhaps the owner or managing director makes an annual visit, but what does that really mean to the staff that work on the ground and have to do the real legwork of getting that wine sold and distributed in their country.

That's why we were amazed when Engelstad, our Norwegian representatives, decided to bring the whole company to visit our cellar. All 32 employees jumped on a plane and came to spend 4 fun-filled days getting to know the faces and places behind the Robertson Winery brand. Apparently there was initially some dithering about whether to let everyone fly in one plane or whether they should be split in two, because in the unlikely event of one plane crashing, at least there would be half of the company left over to continue operations.



Export Sales Co-ordinator Carin Retief (1st right) and the Engelstad group.

But the company soon decided that the one half couldn't do without the other anyway, so we held our collective breath as one of our biggest customers took off, lock, stock and barrel and headed for South Africa.

Well no sooner had they arrived and we quickly understood why our wine has done so well in Norway. A happier or more enthusiastic band of people you will never meet. They operate as a close-knit team where good relations both within the company and with customers are essential. These team-building trips are held every second year and serve not only to strengthen ties with customers but also between staff.

After a very jolly, wine-soaked lunch in Franschhoek, the Engelstad team arrived in Robertson and was shown around the cellar. Then followed a comprehensive tasting in the underground cellar before we all jumped on the bus again and headed for the banks of the Breede River. Despite the unseasonable rain, we hopped on a barge and headed down river to enjoy some more wine and some tasty South African treats like biltong and smoked snoek (fish). Back on dry land a local band singing traditional songs entertained us with more delicious indigenous food and lots of Robertson Wine to follow.

Besides some game viewing, and more delicious meals, the group managed to squeeze in some serious business before heading back to Norway.

Says Engelstad's Signe Hunsbedt: "We had a wonderful time at the Robertson Winery. We were impressed by the modern installations and technology but what we will remember best is the lovely people we met who took so much trouble over us, going out of their way to make sure we were happy and well-cared for."

HARVEST REPORT

These days there's a hectic traffic jam in Constitution Road, Robertson. Turning the corner you'll be met with a long line of trucks each groaning with grapes and a sunburned farmer in shorts and veldskoene (literally veld shoes) leaning out of every cab. They're queuing to off-load their grapes into the whirring presses that are working day and night to put the grapes through their paces and into tanks for fermentation. Winemaker-in-charge, the laconic Lolly Louwrens, seems satisfied so far. The unseasonal rain in December and January did some damage but nothing that couldn't be contained. "I think overall the harvest will be bigger than usual," he says, "but that's also due to some new plantings coming into bearing for the first time." Apparently there are also some new varietals that will be harvested for the first time as well. Pinot Noir, Mourvedre, Grenache and Viognier will all be vinified individually and then either blended into something else to add extra dimension, or bottled on their own if they are really special.

But not even a quarter of the grapes have been harvested so there is still a long road ahead with many sleepless nights and long, sunny days in the vineyards for the winemakers and their teams. Watch this space for news on the first releases of the 2005 vintage!

NEW RELEASE - KING'S RIVER CHARDONNAY 2004

The grapes for this wine were sourced from a premium block on the King's River farm that has been in the Colyn family since 1880. The well-weathered deep Karoo soil on this farm with its generous lime content, adds an underlying richness and complexity to this fruit-driven wine.

Winemaker Jacques Roux is particularly pleased with this vintage describing pungent aromas of crisp citrus with a touch of oatmeal and a dollop of butterscotch. On the palate the ripe pineapple and melon flavours are complemented by a generously smooth mouth-feel and a long, full-flavoured finish.



THE BUZZING BEE

BEE is the new buzzword (excuse the pun) in the South African business world. It stands for Black Economic Empowerment and it is government's attempt to empower previously disadvantaged communities through opportunities created by existing businesses. In the case of the agricultural sector, the opportunities must come, at least partially, through land redistribution.

Managing Director Bowen Botha explains: "We already use the services of black-owned companies and have an Employment Equity programme internally, but we recognize the need to redistribute land to our farm workers and allow them to have a stake in the production, and eventually the profits from this land.

But to simply hand over land is shortsighted because without capital and expertise, the land won't be able to produce profitably. Also, for both sentimental and financial reasons, very few farmers are prepared just to hand over farms which have been in their families for generations.

So Bowen has devised a strategy, which involves not only the Robertson Winery member farms, but also all the grape growers in the Robertson Valley. Each farmer has agreed to pay R20 per ton of grapes delivered into a scheme, which will then buy up farmland that is for sale in the valley. This land will then be managed by the scheme, the grapes being vinified by the relevant cellar. Obviously after each vintage more and more money will be added to the fund and so more and more land can be bought up and more wine made. This in turn will create a wonderful opportunity to create new brands, train up winemakers and additional staff, acquire new equipment etc. and the workers will have a share in the profits.

This plan is still in its infancy. One farm has already been bought but we'll keep you up to date as things develop. Other areas and sectors have already expressed interest in this scheme, in fact some of the fruit processors in the valley have also asked to join up.

PROFILE ON: THOMAS MADIKWA

By now we're all familiar with the story of how Robertson Winery started in the old mission church in Constitution Road. But there's one gentleman that can remember working in that little cellar. His name is Thomas Madikwa and even though he is now 84, he is still working at Robertson Winery, albeit only in harvest time.



Thomas Madikwa

Born in 1921, Thomas grew up in Mount Fletcher in the Eastern Cape but moved to Robertson in the forties finding employment at Robertson Winery, where only a handful of cellar hands were required to put the grapes through their paces. As the winery grew in capacity more help was needed in the harvest and it was Thomas who traveled up to his homeland each year to recruit contract staff. He soon became the supervisor and managed a team of cellarhands.

Bowen Botha recalls: "If ever I needed something done, I would just ask Thomas and he would see to it. I never needed to check up on him, he just got the job done."

He officially retired 5 years ago but Thomas likes to lend a hand at harvest time, doing odd jobs in the cellar where needed. After the harvest he returns to his 3-hectare plot of land just outside the town where he grows mealies (corn) and samp.

"I love working," says Thomas, father of twelve and grandfather of numerous, "the weekends were always too long for me, I used to look forward to Mondays when I could come back to work. I like to be busy and I like to be involved. I really feel part of this place," he says, gesturing towards the cellar, "but I never dreamed it would get so big."



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