

South African WINES Beckon

Ranjan Pal combines the pleasure of a family wedding in the romantic backdrop of vineyards in the heart of South Africa with a voyage of discovery of his own – into the cellars and restaurants of some of the region's best vineyards

This was to be our second trip to South Africa. And this time we were certain that we would not miss out on the famous Route 62 which winds through South Africa's winelands. The main purpose of our visit was my cousin's wedding at Robertson, about 100 km inland from Cape Town, but an equally pleasurable detour was west from there following Route 62.

When planning the trip, we decided to leave the itinerary to the experts. We contacted Michaela Stander, the international market manager for the Wines of South Africa (www.wosa.co.za) whom I had met previously when she visited Delhi for a wine fair a few years ago. Michaela and her team were most helpful in preparing an itinerary for us along Route 62 passing through Franschhoek and basing us in Stellenbosch. Stellenbosch is a picturesque and historic town which bills itself as the wine capital of South Africa. Founded in 1679, it is the second oldest city in South Africa after Cape Town – and its streets are lined with wonderful examples of Cape Dutch architecture.

When setting up our official wine tour, we had emphasised quality over quantity in terms of the vineyards visited and also as diverse a range of types and experiences as possible. So WOSA had us kicking off our journey with the Nederburg winery, South Africa's leading and most highly decorated winemaker. As our guide led us through several huge rooms full of wooden barrels, steel vats and pipes leading everywhere, it was impossible not to be impressed by the quiet power, experience and authority of this well-known winemaker.

Our next stop was at the Fairview wine and cheese farm which was sort of a cross between a department store and a train station with dozens of visitors streaming through to

Left: Sunkissed mountains in the backdrop of the Nederburg vineyards. Bottom: The elegant Nederburg manor house



First Person

sample and purchase a wide selection of wines, cheeses, chocolate and memorabilia. The whole approach was casual, friendly and quirky, very different from the refined elegance of Nederburg. Fairview is famous for its goat tower and we watched in fascination as a couple of Billy goats clambered sure-footedly up the circular staircase which winds its way around the outside of the tower.

Our guide, the red-haired Billie Lambrechts, was very much in the Fairview mould and she led us through an entertaining and lively discussion and tastings of nine wines and cheeses including the proprietary Goats Do Roam brand, a quirky jibe at the French Côte du Rhône wines. Particularly memorable was the Fairview Viognier 2009, Fairview being the first vineyard in South Africa to introduce this varietal into the country and its pairing with a White Rock with Apricot cheese was simply delicious.

We then drove to Stellenbosch and checked into the d'Ouwe Werf hotel (literally meaning The Old Wharf). Established in 1802, this is the oldest hotel in South Africa. Situated a stone's throw from the Mother Church in the heart of town, it is very convenient to walk everywhere. Over the next three days as we based ourselves there, we were to find it our best hotel stay experience – the staff led by the very hospitable manager Elanie Potgieter was amazingly warm and friendly and the hotel was also tremendous value for money with large ensuite bedrooms boasting every facility.

I was really looking forward to dinner that evening where WOSA had booked us at Terroir restaurant, rated number two in South Africa, located on Kleine Zalze, a family-owned wine farm on the outskirts of Stellenbosch. The experience entirely lived up to our expectations and the food was simply outstanding. The foie gras parfait with marinated figs which we



The patio in the Fraai Uitzicht overlooking the vineyards was where the wedding *sangeet* or musical evening was held

had as a starter melted like butter in the mouth and the grilled linefish with olive crust, asparagus and truffle vinaigrette was cooked to perfection. Accompanied by a bottle of excellent Kleine Zalze Family Reserve Sauvignon Blanc 2009 and sitting out under the trees on a balmy summer's evening, this was about as close to sheer bliss as I could imagine!

The highlight of the next day was lunch with Bruce Jack, the extremely affable and articulate owner of the Flagstaff brand at the award-winning Overture restaurant overlooking the scenic Hidden Valley. South African hospitality was on display again, as Bruce insisted that we taste his entire range of Constellation wines. Once again, the food was delicious and I particularly enjoyed the apple wood smoked pork neck accompanied by crackling, mustard sauce, roots and pomme purée. Bruce was a charming host with a genuine interest



Barrel-lined cellar of one of South Africa's most highly decorated wineries, Nederburg

in India and we had an extremely enjoyable and involved discussion ranging through wine, politics, sport and culture. I was very touched by his kindness in going to all the trouble of arranging a golf game for me at the famous Steenburg golf course outside Cape Town, courtesy some Irish expatriate friends of his.

On the final day of our stay in the Cape Winelands, we found ourselves at the other end of the spectrum from Nederburg at the La Riche Winery. Etienne La Riche is a taciturn winemaker of French origin who ironically used to work for Nederburg before setting up on his own in rented premises a few miles away. Literally a one-man band, he produces a limited selection of reds including an award-winning Cabernet Sauvignon. Etienne walked us around his highly labour-intensive mini-winery (which takes all of five minutes) and took the trouble to explain concisely and lucidly the various intricacies of winemaking. We felt that we had been given a true masterclass and it was indeed inspiring that such a David could hold his own against the Goliaths of the industry.

Our last lunch was hosted by the charming Mareli Roux who handles PR for La Motte vineyards. The estate restaurant is named after Jakob Hendrik Pierneef (1886-1957) one of the country's most famous artists known for his portrayals of South African landscapes and architecture. I enjoyed the Cape Bokkom South Africalad with dried



The elegant restaurant at La Motte vineyard is the perfect setting to enjoy excellent wines paired with equally good food

tomatoes, apricots and quails eggs and followed that with the cameline spice seared yellow tuna loin, both characteristic of the unique Cape Winelands cuisine – and we chose the 2009 La Motte Chardonnay, a full-bodied fruity wine as the perfect accompaniment. After lunch we spent a short while touring the small estate museum which has an entire room dedicated to the life and art of Pierneef.

Like almost all of the economy, the wine industry in South Africa is dominated by white people so we made a point of seeking out the only black-owned winery called M'Hudi wines. We had a fascinating discussion with the voluble and articulate Diale "Oupa" Rangaka (who along with his wife Malmsey) owns M'Hudi as to how and why they got into wine cultivation. Frankly the wine is not much to write home about and its production is outsourced to the next-door Villera winery as the Rangaka family does not currently have its own winery.

But their journey has been a fascinating one and parallels the story behind M'Hudi which is derived from the Setswana word, "Mohudi" meaning "wanderer". It is also the name given to the heroine of a great African story who fled her war-ravaged village in search of a new beginning. The story is one of courage and determination against seemingly impossible odds and the relentless pursuit of one's dreams and aspirations. One could immediately see why the Rangaka family would powerfully empathise with this pioneering vision – as the promo for M'Hudi poignantly puts it – it is the story of South Africa. ♦

The estate restaurant at La Motte vineyards is named after Jakob Hendrik Pierneef the country's most famous artist



The main house of Bon Cap Organic Winery and Guest Farm



Romancing The Wines

The Barrel Room of the Bon Cap winery where the wedding ceremony was held

I was delighted when my cousin announced that she was finally getting married. But my joy knew no bounds when she announced that the wedding was to take place on a wine farm in the Robertson valley, just about 100 miles inland from Cape Town!

The bride and groom had met while working on the border of South Africa and Zimbabwe at a place called Musina, fallen in love and the rest, as they say, is history. They had planned the destination wedding keeping in mind the fact that they were expecting over 100 overnight guests from at least 15 different countries. And Bon Cap winery and guest farm was the perfect setting for them.

We got to the Bon Cap winery on December 17 and the wedding was to take place the next day. We were warmly welcomed by Michelle Du Preez, the attractive and efficient wife of the winemaker Roelf, who handles the marketing side of things. It was her calm efficiency and warm hospitality that had played a big part in my cousin picking Bon Cap for the most important day of her life. She had booked rooms for the close family at Bon Cap and we were put up in the Viognier room above the main winery with a nice view of the distant Sonderend mountains.

Following the dress rehearsal, the bride's side of the party was invited to a *sangeet* (musical evening) dinner at Fraai Uitzicht 1798, another wine farm situated a few miles away. Fraai Uitzicht means 'beautiful view' and we certainly felt it

lived up to its reputation as we walked up to the restaurant located in the Old Cape Dutch house and were handed a welcome glass of Graham Beck Brut. The cordial mingling of friends and family who had come from all over the world set the tone for the heartfelt and humorous toasts that came after. Dinner was a delightful affair and the food was delicious and home-cooked using fresh produce from the vegetable and herb garden. Among the wines, particularly noteworthy was their flagship, Fraai Uitzicht 1798 Merlot 2006 harvested by hand from one single vineyard.

The next day, the wedding ceremony which was held in the Barrel Room of the Bon Cap winery went off without a hitch. It was a beautiful ceremony with a Buddhist priest presiding. Following the ceremony, everyone gathered to celebrate in the main restaurant where Bon Cap pulled out the stops with an array of multi-cuisine fusion starters paired with a Champagne punch, the Champagne being their own. The main meal was followed by a three-tier wedding cake. After the speeches were over, the dancing and drinking went on well past midnight. I was kept busy by my job as MC so was unable to partake as much as I would have liked to of the excellent Ruins Pinotage and Sauvignon Blanc 2010 that was on offer! Pinotage is South Africa's signature variety, being a unique cross between the delicate Pinot Noir and the more robust Hermitage grape. ❖ —RP

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FOUR SEASONS BARRIQUE RESERVE COLLECTION



Aged, and made with superior quality grapes, wine-makers in the past were guilty of 'reserving' some of their best wine. They just wouldn't sell these wines immediately owing to their premium quality. Over time this has become a practice carried down for generations giving these exceptional wines, of impeccable quality and character, the name 'reserve' wines. Observing this age old tradition, Four Seasons wines proudly present the first vintage of their premium reserve wines – the Four Seasons Barrique Reserve Collection 2008. Produced in

limited batches, with the best quality grapes handpicked from the oldest vineyards in the Sahyadri Valley of Maharashtra, the Barrique Reserve Collection expresses a symphony of flavours and aromas of two popular grape varieties – Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz. A nine-month maturation in new French oak barriques (small oak barrels) lends these wines a subtle complexity, an enigmatic bouquet, a velvety texture and a lingering finale, offering wine connoisseurs the best elements every good wine should bring to the palate.

Meticulously and passionately crafted by India's most experienced wine-maker Abhay Kewadkar, the Four Seasons Barrique Reserve wines are ready to drink now, but will offer excellent varietal definition and complexity if aged over three to five years.

HONOURS AT INDIAN WINE COMPETITIONS



In two recent wine competitions, headed by a panel of distinguished judges, both the Barrique Reserve wines were winners – Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve was adjudged 'Best Indian Red Wine' at the India Wine Challenge 2010, and the Four Seasons Barrique Reserve Shiraz won Bronze at the Sommellerie India Wine Competition 2009. Both these accolades coming in the first vintage of the wines is a testimony to the high wine-making standards and quality of these wines.

They say, enjoying a glass of wine is like holding a story by its stem. Theme, character, composition – the critical elements of a story, find expression in the wines of the Four Seasons Barrique Reserve Collection. So get ready to enjoy the experience of unravelling; sip by exquisite sip, the heart, body and soul of this unique Indian Wine Story - The Four Seasons Barrique Reserve Collection.

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