

The first vintage in South Africa took place in February 1659 - a date which coincides roughly with the first harvests of the Bordeaux First Growths. A mere 34 years later the Meerlust estate was granted to Henning Husing. In 1757 the property came into the hands of the Myburgh family, with whom it has remained to this day. It is an arresting thought that the Myburghs acquired Meerlust roughly 100 years after Van Riebeeck set up the Dutch colony at the Cape, when slavery was the primary source of labour in South Africa and America, before James Cook landed in Australia and when viticulture was also in its infancy in the Medoc. I can think of no other Cape estate - or, for that matter, any Bordeaux property - which could make a comparable claim to longevity and continuity.

Meerlust burst onto the modern South African wine scene in the second half of the 1970s. Nico Myburgh, father of the present owner Hannes, had been a grape grower rather than a wine producer for most of his life. With the growing fashion for red wine (which followed the promulgation of the wine of origin legislation in 1973) a small portion of his grape harvest was designated for estate wine production in 1975. Within a few years - and with a great deal of fanfare - the first 20th century vintage of Meerlust came to market. It was a single varietal Cabernet and it was an instant success.

Distributed through the trade on an "allocation only" basis, it sold out swiftly. At the time I did not think of it as a striking example of Cape cabernet: it was elegant and refined, but lacked the intensity and fruit sweetness of the traditional "dikvoet" examples which came from warmer bush-vine sites in the more inland parts of Stellenbosch and Paarl. This is not to say I didn't like it - but it was a wine to admire, rather than to be seduced by. Well stored bottles have aged rather well. I had one a few weeks back which was as polished and precise as the first bottles I tasted in the 1970s.

Nico Myburgh - working at the time quite closely with The Bergkelder's Julius Laszlo - continued as an innovator and pioneer. The next year he launched what turned out to be the only vintage ever of Meerlust Pinotage - a wine which has aged as well as the cabernet harvested the year before. From 1977 no wine was sold under the Meerlust label. It was an egregious vintage and it didn't take much judgement to decide that no good would come from bottling anything from that most miserable of harvests. 1978 saw another very fine Meerlust Cabernet and it seemed that this was where the future of the brand lay. But Myburgh had also been one of the first to plant merlot in South Africa and in 1980 Meerlust became only the second South African winery to release a Bordeaux blend. Rubicon (celebrating the wine's revolutionary role) was an instant success and it has remained the flagship of the range ever since.

In the past 40 years only three winemakers have been in control of Meerlust's cellars (in effect really only two, because by 1978 Giorgio dalla Cia took charge and remained in that position until he handed over to Chris Williams, the present incumbent, in 2004. It has had only two members of the Myburgh family directing it - Nico until his death in 1988 and Hannes since then. In every sense of the word, it is a monument and a national treasure. This does not mean that all its wines are world class - or even extraordinary. For that matter, nor is everything that has come from Chateau Latour or Mouton Rothschild. But together with the great properties of Bordeaux, Meerlust is an icon. In an age when the celebration of the new and untested takes precedence over the long-established, this is worth remembering.