

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 10 October 2014

After 1994, following South Africa's return to the real world, the wine industry's craving for overseas investment (as a vindication that we had moved beyond the irrelevance of the isolation era) had a faintly ludicrous air about it. Foreign buyers (no matter what their credentials) were greeted with the same fervour ordinarily reserved for the arrival of the messiah. Mostly this reflected our neediness: what might have made a difference, in terms of our international standing, would have been a deal (not just a licensing arrangement) with First Growth, the equivalent of the Mouton-Mondavi Opus One joint venture.

It still hasn't happened. However, we have seen some action from the world of Superseconds and Second Growths. Towards the end of the 1990s Hubert de Bouard (Chateau Angelus) and Bruno Prats (Cos d'Estournel), working with Lowell Jooste of Klein Constantia, put some money into a property called Anwilka in Stellenbosch. Then, a few years ago, when Jooste sold his South African wine businesses, the buyers offered his erstwhile partners an equity opportunity in the enlarged company. Accordingly today Klein Constantia has, amongst its shareholders, one who used to own a Medoc Supersecond and one who is still a proprietor of a St Emilion Premier Grand Cru.

Just over ten years ago (and while she still owned Chateau Pichon Lalande) May-Eliane de Lenquesaing bought a property called Glenelly adjacent to Rustenberg in Stellenbosch's Ida's Valley. There has been nothing cosmetic about her involvement, and since then she has lavished great care, as well as considerable investment, on her Stellenbosch estate. When she sold Pichon to the Rouzaud family (of Champagne Louis Roederer fame) about a year later, she freed up her time to give Glenelly her full attention.

May de Lenquesaing inherited Pichon in 1978. At the time the property was bankrupt and a long way from becoming the showcase it is today. She directed and drove its renaissance, lifting its profile and transforming it into one of the top ten estates of the Medoc. She has now brought the same energy and drive - but with vastly more experience - to her South African investment. Given the reputation of the investor, the international technical expertise, the new vineyard programme, and the state-of-the art cellar, Glenelly is probably the closest South Africa has come to the Mouton-Mondavi Opus One venture in California.

Tasting the current and near-future releases with cellarmaster Luke O'Cuinneagain, it is clear that "Madame La Generale" (as she was known in Bordeaux) has not erred in her choice of property or in the man appointed to make the wines. The vineyards are starting to show some maturity, and this much is evident in the fruit. Georg Riedel (of the eponymous wine glass company) described the 2010 Syrah as the best he has tasted outside the Northern Rhone. The Grand Vin - a Bordeaux blend with a healthy dollop of shiraz - is a striking interpretation of how most 19th century clarets were made. The Lady May - a Bordeaux red blend which has already garnered a Platter Five Star award - has the balance, intensity and finesse you would expect of a future South African classic. Both of the cellar's two Chardonnays (one unwooded, the other branded "Grand Vin") have great intensity and purity. The former offers refreshing elegance, the latter the complexity - without excessive 'creaminess' - of a more restrained example from the Cote de Beaune.

Luke O'Cuinneagain (who has been at Glenelly since its first fruit came into the winery),

uses the ambient natural yeast for all fermentations. He has been delighted and a little surprised to discover that, every year, alcohols are getting lower. By the time the 2013s and 2014s are released, the levels will rival current fine wines from Bordeaux. However, a word of caution: these are not wines which will appeal to those seeking instant gratification: the whites need at least three years, the reds a minimum of five.