

# THE ANDRÉ L SIMON LECTURE 2009

Presented by

**Mutle Mogase**

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At Haute Cabrière Restaurant, Franschhoek, South Africa

## "The South African Wine and Culinary Journey, Some Reflections"

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour and a privilege to have been chosen to address you this afternoon, especially this particular month and this particular year.

As you know by now, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1659, the first grapes were pressed in the Cape, thus beginning this long journey that has led us here today.

This year also marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a free and democratic South Africa. On the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2004, South Africa held its first democratic elections and on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2004 Nelson Mandela became the first president of a democratically elected South African government.

For the first time since 1652, South Africans could live side by side as equals.

Both these events, the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652 and the ascendancy of Nelson Mandela to the presidency, heralded significant new epochs in various aspects of our lives, including culture, and by extension our approach to food and wine.

I suspect most of you here regard yourselves somewhat as epicureans, and I use this as a base.

*"The philosophy of Epicurus has a complete and interdependent system, involving a view of the goal of human life (happiness, resulting from the absence of physical pain, & mental disturbance) and an empiricist theory of knowledge (sensations, including the perception of pleasure and pain, as infallible criteria) amongst others. He regarded the unacknowledged fear of death and punishment as the primary cause of anxiety among*

*human beings, and anxiety in turn as a source of extreme & irrational desires. He believed the elimination of the fears and corresponding desires would leave people free to pursue the pleasures, both physical and mental, to which they are naturally drawn, and to enjoy the peace of mind that is consequent upon their regularly expected and achieved satisfaction."*

I am not about to give a philosophy lecture, but I believe this approach is a thread through our lives and I guess part of the "*raison d'être*" for your society.

With South Africans being able to travel freely around the world post 1994 and the influx of international visitors, restaurant offerings and winemaking have changed significantly.

This restaurant that you are dining at this afternoon is a true testimony to this. The sophisticated South African palate continues to offer great opportunities to innovative chefs.

In the last 15 years South Africa has seen an increase in the number of fine dining restaurants that are truly world class, including Reuben's here in Franschhoek, Rust & Vrede in Stellenbosch, and Auberge Michel in Johannesburg, and the ones that you have dined at over the past few days.

Like their counterparts around the world, South African dining is now focused on product and flavours. Many in the restaurant trade will attest to the fact that previously dining was more dominated by size or portion.

Eating in South Africa is now more and more dominated by search for dining experience as opposed to sustenance. Also interesting in South Africa, speaking to a few restaurateurs, black South Africans are more open to trying new experiences.

Fine dining in South Africa also has some regional twists. Where you are, ladies & gentlemen, in the Western Cape especially Franschhoek is probably the best place you could be in South Africa for culinary experiences. The Western Cape restaurants use a lot more local produce than any other region in the country.

Ironically it was the search for food that shaped modern South Africa: spices drew the Dutch East Indian Company to Java in the mid 1600s, leading to a need for a half-way refreshment stop for its ships. This necessitated the development of farms here to supply produce to passing ships. The additional benefit, driven zealously by Jan van Riebeeck, was the establishment of vineyards and wine making.

I like the following quote by Thomas Love Peacock: *“There are two reasons for drinking wine, when you are thirsty, to cure it, the other, when you are not thirsty, to prevent it ....prevention is better than cure”*

With a handful of exceptions, the wines of South Africa were for many generations seen as the poor relations of those of Europe; this is no longer so.

In the past 15 to 20 years South African wine has emerged with startling speed and vigour to find an independent voice and a clear highly respected voice of its own. South African wine is rapidly gaining recognition in international wine circles.

This has been achieved despite the fact that production has been relatively small and quite distant from key wine markets.

The achievement of local wine farmers and wine makers has been little short of heroic. According to the South African Wine Industry Review the number of wineries has grown from 315 in 1998 to 560 in 2007. In the same period, wine production has grown from about 815million litres to 1043million litres.

Exports also grew almost three-fold from 118m litres to over 300m litres. In 1997 only 20% of vineyards were planted with red varietals, in 2007 this number was 44%. South Africa is now the 9<sup>th</sup> largest producer and produces 3% of the world's wine production.

Ladies & gentlemen, those are but mere statistics; the real story of South African wine is the phenomenal increase in the quality of our wines.

When the world opened up to us after the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990, the learning curve became steep. We discovered and learnt a lot of things: that some of the vines we had were not what we thought they were. We discovered the critical importance of site selection and terroir and started demarcating blocks of land in the vineyards. We started learning about phenolic ripeness instead of picking automatically, based on sugar levels. To this point some of you will remember that up to about the mid 90's, the bulk of South African reds were produced at alcohols of around 12% to 13%, resulting mostly in green tannins. Of course, attaining phenolic ripeness has resulted in raised alcohols. We are, however, achieving balance in our wines.

These lessons, this steep learning curve, resulting in tremendous increases in quality, continue to be affirmed and confirmed through winnings in international competitions and ratings by major publications.

The feats in 2008:

- Chardonnay du monde
- Groot Constantia 2006 – Gold Medal
- Concours du Mondiale de Bruxelles
- 4 S.A. wines won Grand Gold Medals, about 20 won Gold Medals
- Decanter Wine Awards
- 13 Gold Medal Awards
- Wine Spectator Top 100
- No. 46 Warwick Estate Reserve 2005 - 93 points.
- International Wine & Spirit Competition - South Africa won 6 of the 23 international trophies on offer - competition included France, Italy & Spain.
- Kanonkop Paul Sauer 2003 won the coveted Chateau Pichon Longueville Comtesse
- Lalande Trophy for Blended Red Wine for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time.

These are but some of the examples.

Not only has South Africa been exposed to leading-edge viticultural research and winemaking techniques internationally, but prominent viticulturists and winemakers from other countries have identified South Africa as having outstanding viticultural potential and have invested in ventures here too.

To name some, Zelma Long of Simi Vineyards in California, May de Lencquesing of Pichon Longueville Comtesse, Anne Cointreau, Michel Rolland, Pierre Lurton of Cheval Blanc has consulted extensively here too.

As Vaughan Johnson says in this foreword to the John Platter Guide, the ultimate South African wine guide:

*“S.A wines have exciting prospects; new and rediscovered vineyard areas are gaining a following, varieties better suited to a Mediterranean climate show promise; fresh focus keeps debuting in undiminished numbers, while established brands are re-inventing themselves for 21<sup>st</sup> century conditions.”*

As the American writer and critic, Clifton Fadman, said:

*“To take wine into our mouths is to savor a droplet of the river of human history.”*

The South African consumer has no doubt benefited enormously from these developments. Accessibility of premium quality wine is still very reasonable. This, and I believe the food is well priced, makes fine dining a real pleasure in South Africa. This combination, *“leaves us free to pursue the pleasures, both physical and mental, to which we are naturally drawn and to enjoy the peace of mind that is consequent upon our regular expected and easily achieved satisfaction”* to paraphrase Epicurus.

I hope this gives some context, as you gather in our beautiful country, as André Simon set out, *“as people who believe that the right understanding of good food and wine is an essential part of personal contentment and health, and that your intelligent approach to the pleasures and problems of the table do offer far greater rewards than the mere satisfaction of appetite.”*

Ladies & Gentlemen, you are here in a very historic year, full of contradictions yet full of promise.

In closing, remember, it is not what we have, but what we enjoy that constitutes abundance.

I trust you have enjoyed the past few days and know that you will enjoy the rest of your stay.

**PLEASE COME BACK TO OUR BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY!**

Mutle Mogase

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