

Sweet on dessert wines

Sampling five vintages of Fleur du Cap's five-star Noble Late Harvest wine offers a rare chance to appreciate varietal characteristics



IMAGINE the scene: it's May 1760, and winter has arrived at the Cape. Cold winds and driving rain buffet the tiny town of Stellenbosch. A single-storey Cape Dutch house in Church Street is warmed by a sizable fire in the kitchen hearth.

Glowing coals have been placed in little pans in the foot-warmers, small wooden boxes with perforated tops. Guests and hosts warm their feet on these as they sit around a table, laden with *soetkoekies*, preserves and glasses of wine jelly. They sip golden dessert wine from stemmed glasses as news from near and far is exchanged.

Fast forward to 2010. Mid-May and the weather has abruptly changed from balmy autumn to torrential downpour and chilly winds. The house in Church Street now presents a neo-Georgian façade, occupies a national heritage site, and has just taken on a new role as the Coopmanhuijs boutique hotel and spa. A fire glows in the lounge as staff set the dining room for a tasting of golden dessert wines.

We gathered in this hostelry for a vertical tasting of five vintages of Fleur du Cap's five-star Noble Late Harvest wines – starting with 2005. While the brand is synonymous with quality, their delicious dessert wines are not as widely known as their whites and reds, probably because *soetes* are not trendy.

Viticulturist Bennie Liebenberg spends much of his time hunting down vineyards of white grapes that have attracted the noble rot, as botrytis is known, a fungus that thrives when sun is combined with high humidity. When the grapes are infected, berries shrivel and sugar concentrated.

He looks for vines with 60 to 70 percent infection, when he is likely to tell winemaker Pieter Badenhorst to get ready to make late harvest wine, a task he tackles with great care and enthusiasm.

Badenhorst uses special yeasts to start fermentation of his pressed juices with high sugar content, then nurses his products through to fining and bottling.

Tasting five vintages in succes-



SOURCING THE SOETES: Fleur du Cap viticulturist Bennie Liebenberg looks for quality botrytis-infected grapes.

sion gave us a rare chance to appreciate varietal characteristics.

A 2005 Rhine riesling was combined with chardonnay and gewürztraminer to produce the liquid gold we sampled, darker than its younger cousins, a little spice adding to the honeyed but still fresh flavours. This freshness was an appealing feature common to all the vintages.

The '06, '07 and '08 vintages are still in stock, priced at R120.

Rhine riesling provided all the grapes for 2006, the wine offering bursts of citrus followed by dried fruit flavours similar to the 2007, Badenhorst's maiden vintage and my favourite.

In 2008, semillon from Durbanville combined with weisser

riesling to make the blend, while the exciting '09 was made from grapes from old bush-vine chenin from Firgrove, with a little of the 2008 blended into it.

It will be released at year-end, and is worth waiting for, as a potential perfect partner for blue cheese, chicken liver pate and a few classic desserts. Alcohol levels between 9 and 10 percent are another plus.

● For more than three centuries, visitors and settlers from the Netherlands have headed south to the Cape of Good Hope. Today – wine over-production and recession notwithstanding – Dutch investors are still attracted to the beauty and potential of Stellenbosch vineyards. Fons Aaldering bought his



HISTORIC HOSTELRY: Coopmanhuijs hotel and spa has opened in Stellenbosch in time for the World Cup influx.

Devon Valley farm six years ago with the simple, if ambitious, goal of making wine that would rate among the top 10 in the country within a decade.

Earlier this year, he launched the maiden trio of Aaldering reds in his home country, where an impressive number of top restaurants – including 12 Michelin-starred venues – now list his labels.

Here, Aaldering publicist Nicolette Waterford unerringly chose La Colombe to host the local launch last month, just ahead of its listing as 12th best restaurant in the world.

The trio – all 2007 vintage, and all of which spent 24 months in French oak – consists of a full-bodied pinotage that's destined for a great future, a robust and spicy shiraz that is ready to take on flavour-packed red meat dishes and a 50-50 blend of cab and merlot with softer tannins and loads of fruit.

They make an impressive debut for Helene van der Westhuizen, who started her career at the Bergkelder before moving to Diemersdal and is now GM, viticulturist and winemaker at Aaldering.

Expect to pay around R160 at wine boutiques for these newcomers in their French bottles with Spanish capsules. When youthful

vineyards of chardonnay and sauvignon blanc mature, the range will expand, while their gourmet owner is hatching plans to invest in the Boland's gastronomic world.

● The Stellenbosch region is abuzz with plans to mark both the World Cup and the annual Wine Festival in superb style.

Making an impressive head-start is Idiom Wines's owner, Roberto Bottega, an Italian who is passionate about football, who is hosting a five-a-side competition in a new mini-pitch prepared in his Helderberg vineyards.

This tournament takes place on July 4-5, after the quarter-final in Cape Town.

Visiting fans are invited to take part, cheered on by friends on the side, and vuvuzelas are welcome. Those who know their cultivars can make up blends to match their favourite soccer formations – think four parts cab, four parts merlot and two parts shiraz and see what prevails with this 4-4-2 formation.

To enter a team or for more information, e-mail wine@idi-om.co.za

The annual Stellenbosch wine festival takes place a month earlier than usual, from July 1 to 5, with a host of appetising

events for local, upcountry and international visitors. Watch this space for details, along with some wonderful prizes for TGW readers.

