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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ...**SCHALK VAN DER WESTHUIZEN, ESTATE MANAGER AND WINEMAKER AT ALTO**

At the helm of Alto Estate, winemaker Schalk van der Westhuizen, is in charge of all the activities on the farm, coaxing the wine from the vine to the bottle whilst keeping an eye on the vineyard and wine workers as well as the tasting room.

Renowned in the wine industry, Schalk practically grew up to become a winemaker and wine literally runs through his blood. He was born and bred on Alto's sister farm, Neethlingshof, where his father Gys van der Westhuizen was farm manager on the estate for 30 years. Schalk recalls that whenever his mom was looking for him as a little boy, she always found him in the cellar.

After completing his diploma at Elsenburg, Schalk took over the reigns from his father in 1973 to manage the farm, later becoming the cellar master as well. At first he was responsible for managing the vineyards and a comprehensive replanting programme, but in 1994 he started making Neethlingshof's award-winning wines for which he became well-known.

Schalk singles out Giles Webb, who later became winemaker at Thelema, as someone who played a vital role in his honing process when he initially started out as a winemaker. "Giles was always very helpful and basically a walking encyclopaedia on the winemaking process."

In the late 90's Schalk took on a new challenge by accepting the position as winemaker at Alto, an estate reputed for producing world-class red wines. Luckily Schalk's experience with the Neethlingshof red wines has stood him in good stead as his maiden vintage in 2001 was a huge success with both the Alto Estate and the Cabernet Sauvignon of that year being very well received.



His philosophy toward making wine is one of simplicity. "For me it is important to make a wine that everyone enjoys. I don't interfere with nature and let the vines work their own magic; I'm simply there to assist in the process of producing a wonderful product. I believe that the whole winemaking process must be as natural as possible."

Whilst Shiraz is his favourite wine to make, Sauvignon Blanc is his drink of choice.

"They call it the Eskimo wine as the cultivar prefers cool climates and when the grapes are optimally ripe they need to be harvested immediately, not a day later."

Making wine is certainly not without challenges and with a lot of Alto wines exported to Europe he is challenged with keeping the alcohol levels low as the Europeans favour it. Furthermore, it is no easy task to harvest all the grapes at optimal ripeness making the harvest season a very demanding time of the year.

With numerous awards under his belt, one particular award that this humble winemaker is very proud of is the Gold medal clinched by the limited release Alto Shiraz 2001 at the Decanter World Wine Awards. This prized wine also scooped the trophy for the best South African Rhône Varietal over 10 pounds.

When this workaholic, who has been married to his wife Esrie for 31 years and is the father of three sons, is not busy on the estate, he is an avid sports fanatic.

AWARDS

STELLENZICHT AND LOMOND SCOOP 4½ STARS IN SA SHIRAZ CHALLENGE

Stellenzicht Golden Triangle 2005 and Lomond Conebush 2006 have been ranked amongst the top five South African Shiraz wines all scoring 4½ stars in the 2008 Lexus Shiraz Challenge run in conjunction with WINE magazine.

This year's Challenge winner – also scoring 4½ stars – is Nederburg The Winemaster's Reserve 2006.

The 2005 Stellenzicht vintage is an elegant, full bodied Shiraz brimming with ripe fruit, dark chocolate and nuances of tobacco from this renowned Shiraz producer in the famous 'Golden Triangle' on the slopes of the Helderberg. Lomond is one of a handful of wine farms situated near the southern most point of Cape Agulhas and the Conebush Syrah 2006 reflects this cool appellation with its subtle berry flavours, notes of white pepper and beautifully integrated tannins.

Shiraz lovers will be able to sample a selection of the best wines from the Lexus Shiraz Challenge at public tastings in Cape Town and Johannesburg on 14 August and 21 August respectively. Tickets, at a cost of R100 a person, can be booked by emailing subs@rsp.co.za or phoning 0860 110 203.



NEWS FROM THE FARMS

FOIE GRAS MEETS ALLESVERLOREN PORT



Seasoned chef Thomas Sinn, recommends serving Foie Gras with Allesverloren Port. Acclaimed for his contemporary interpretations of European classics at Sinn's in Cape Town's trendy Wembley Square and with a Diners Club Platinum Wine List Award firmly under his belt, Thomas knows a thing or two about food and wine pairing!

His Pan Fried Foie Gras with a port reduction on caramelized apples and braised red cabbage pairs beautifully with the rich aromas of honey, raisins and black current backed by the alluring undertones of chocolate and mocha of the Allesverloren Port. This port is a well integrated mélange of traditional Portuguese varietals aged in oak for just over four years. It is full and rich on the palate with a lingering fruit cake aftertaste.



NEWS FROM ABROAD

PLAISIR DE MERLE LEADS A FRANCE VS. THE NEW WORLD WINE TASTE-OFF IN DENMARK

Plaisir de Merle Grand Plaisir 2004 has been singled out as the top wine in a comparative France vs. The New World taste-off held in Denmark.

Conducted as a blind tasting, this taste-off was arranged by Christian Allegret and Philippe Cazade of Yvon Mau, who selected the French wines. The New World wines that were chosen were in the same price range as the French wines.

Attaining the highest score of 50, South Africa's Plaisir de Merle Grand Plaisir 2004 tipped the scale in favour of the New World wines, which ultimately outclassed their French opposition during the tasting.

STELLENZICHT PINOTAGE IMPRESSES WINE WRITERS IN STOCKHOLM

Stellenzicht Pinotage stood up to critical acclaim by Scandinavian wine writers who were guided through a rare 10 year vertical tasting in Stockholm by winemaker Guy Webber.

"The purpose of the tasting was to show that Stellenzicht is not merely a "Shiraz producer" and that its Pinotages come with the same pedigree and track record as the rest of its wines," said Guy, who is considered one of South Africa's Pinotage masters having produced no less than six Absa Top 10 Pinotages, four of which since joining Stellenzicht.



According to the tasters, there is a certain consistency in quality and style amongst the vintages although vintage variations are noticeable. This is as expected in a wine which originates from basically the same vineyards each year. The tasters were particularly impressed by the fact that this consistency has been achieved notwithstanding the dramatic increase in volumes produced over the vintages - from around 5,000 litres in 1998 to around 80,000 litres in 2006. The tasters agreed that the younger vintages are showing incredible promise.

"What pleased me most about the tasting was the overall fondness amongst the tasters for the variety per se," said Guy who singles out Pinotage as his absolute favourite varietal.

The wines did well under scrutiny as international-styled red wines and not merely as Pinotages from a particular producer.

"I believe that this just reinforces the fact that we need to keep on doing what we do with Pinotage at Stellenzicht as the wines from these vineyards will continue to impress wherever they are tasted," Guy added.