



profile

# WOMAN OF THE VINE

Soweto-born Nomonde Kubheka is making  
a name for herself as a Cape winemaker  
and judge, writes Gail Alswang

*When she talks of the wine her voice softens like a woman in love*

**DESPITE HAVING PREVIOUSLY JUDGED IN OTHER COMPETITIONS, SUCH AS THE SOUTH African Young Wine Show and SAA Wine on Board listing, 31-year-old KWV winemaker Nomonde Kubheka was ‘dumbstruck’ on being asked to join the judging panel for the 2009 Diners Club Winemaker of the Year Award. With more than a touch of awe in her voice, she talks of ‘the honour’. And, of course she was delighted too. ‘This was a first for me. What makes this particular competition different is that it awards the wine as well as the winemaker.’**

Nomonde found the composition of the panel as fascinating as the actual judging itself. ‘The other panel members, including a Cape Wine Master and a sommelier, brought a wealth of experience to the judging of this competition. John Avery was the international judge and knows both the local and global wines very well.’ The fact that the panel includes ‘a cross-section of people involved in different areas of the wine industry’ was fascinating, offering a great opportunity for her to interact with the experts.

With the Stellenbosch University Wine Evaluation Course and the Organoleptic Judging of Pinotage certificates in hand, she is also part of the tasting panel for the Wine & Spirits Board in the Paarl District. ‘It helps to have judging qualifications in this industry, although I believe nothing beats practical experience and training.’

So how did a young woman who grew up in Soweto, far from the vineyard-dotted slopes of the Cape, become involved in winemaking?

Nomonde says she had absolutely no idea what she wanted to do once she had matriculated in 1996, bar that she wanted to further her education. As luck would have it, her engineering dad, who worked for a company that manufactured tanks for the wine and beer industries, heard about the winemaking course via his contacts. ‘He obviously thought it was a great idea. Although at the time I was unsure about it,’ she says, adding with her infectious laugh, ‘but now I’m certain it was a great idea.’

She modestly puts receiving a bursary from KWV in her first year studying for a BSc Agriculture in Oenology and Viticulture at Stellenbosch University to being ‘fortunate’. But it’s had an enormous impact on her career. Part of the bursary agreement was that she would work for KWV when she completed her studies. And that she did. ‘I started working as a production trainee in 2003 and haven’t looked back.’

Now a winemaker in the red wine cellar, Nomonde’s first wine was the 2003 Pinotage. ‘My class practicals and studies never prepared me for my first real harvest. Although I’ve done more than a few harvests now, I’m still excited by the anticipation and the energy around that time of the year.’ Her personal favourite single varietal is Shiraz; when she talks of the wine her voice softens like a woman in love. However, she is quick to add, she also loves blends.

And there is no doubt about it, she is ‘now a wine lover through and through’.

She is looking forward to her first international vintage this year, probably around October/November. ‘I’m working on getting placement in a winery in Bordeaux, France. It will be an awesome opportunity to learn about wines from other wine-producing regions.’

And when she isn’t making wine? ‘I’ve recently taken up running as a hobby, a bug I caught from a friend and a colleague. The challenge for 2010 is to complete at least ten 10 km races. Thus far I’ve managed three, including the Old Mutual Two Oceans 21 km in April 2010. I’m really proud of that.’

She may have grown up in Gauteng, but when her family moved to Cape Town in December 1995 after her dad got a position in the Mother City, her course was set and she has settled in the Cape with ease. She reckons ‘the people in the Cape seem more relaxed and laid-back. It may have to do with the abundance of natural beauty; mountains and ocean. People are more into the quality of life around these parts.’

Having her family around helps. ‘I go home to Pinelands almost every weekend. Another incentive to go visit home is my mom’s cooking. I love spending time with my parents and siblings, there’s a lot of love and plenty of laughs.’ 