

A GOOD VINTAGE

Turning 30 this year, the Diners Club Winemaker of the Year Award has matured into an industry benchmark for excellence. Three major players pop the cork on what makes it special



JANE LEDGER

Diners Club Regional Manager, Western Cape

Jane, who has been with Diners Club for two decades, is committed to enhancing services and products that suit the lifestyles of Diners Club members. Wine is high up on the list and a personal passion of hers.

'In 2004 Pieter 'Bubbles' Ferreira became the first Winemaker of the Year to physically show his appreciation for having won with his Graham Beck Cap Classique when he leapt to his feet, roared out of the awards ceremony and took a flying leap into a lake!

'The next year, we asked him back to say a few words, and he said, "This award changes your life."

'That sums it up. It all began 30 years ago when Hugh Peatling, who was then managing director, recognised that Diners Club should align itself with the finer things in life appreciated by its members. One of these was wine.

'Being a wine fundi himself, Hugh's aim was to provide a platform for winemakers to continually strive to raise the standard of wines produced in this country. Three decades on, winemakers tell us that Diners Club Winemaker of the Year is still the one award they want to win.

'One thing that has changed is that we have brought our members closer to the winemakers and the winning wines, making the top three wines available to our members, for example.

'This year, being the 30th anniversary, we are planning to offer members a wine weekend in Cape Town where they will attend the black-tie award function, taste exceptional wines in the area, and enjoy a weekend to remember.'

DAVE HUGHES

Judge Chairman, Diners Club Winemaker of the Year

With a lifetime's experience in the wine industry, Dave has been involved with the Winemaker of the Year Award just about since its inception. He lives on a wine farm in Devon Valley in the Cape with his winemaker wife, Lorna, and seven dogs, including Bristle, the 'brak' immortalised on her wine label, Stonehill.

'In many ways, not too much has changed with regards to the way we judge the Winemaker of the Year. It is still all about quality, a search for the very best in whichever category of wine it is for that year.

'We still have an international judge, but these days everyone on our panel of five judges holds a professional qualification of some sort, whether it is a wine degree, a judging certificate or status as a Cape Wine Master.

'The judging is a very quiet affair. We have about 64 semi-finalists, as we had last year, and everyone gets a blind sample from the same bottle in a numbered glass. In the old days we had a more complicated system so that no one could say "Ooh, this is horrible" and influence the others.

'The competition has grown like crazy within the industry. In the early days we may have received 30 or 40 entries, whereas now we may get 120 entries that are trimmed down to a judgeable number. Even so, it is very rare that one wine stands out and we normally are left with half a dozen finalists to be judged the next day.

'This year the category is Sauvignon Blanc, which is made to a very high standard in this country, so we are anticipating some excellent wines. There are two distinctly different styles, one being fruity and tropical, with hints of pawpaw and guava, and the other being far earthier, more stony with a hint of khakibos, depending on where the grapes are grown.

'If I think back on my highlights, it has been when the less fashionable wines come up, like Muscadell and Cape Riesling.'

WALTER FINLAYSON

Winner of the first two Diners Club Winemaker of the Year Awards

Not content with winning the first ever title in this prestigious contest with his Blaauwklippen Zinfandel 1980, Walter was back on the podium the next year with his Blaauwklippen Cabernet Sauvignon 1980. Seven years later his brother, Peter, would win the title too with a Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir.

'Winning the Winemaker of the Year award was undoubtedly the highlight of my winemaking career.

'I had no idea that I would win. I had been invited to the first award function ever at Groot Constantia, and told to wait outside. It was quite extraordinary to then step inside and discover that I had won.

'It certainly put Blaauwklippen on the map. The category of that first year was Innovative Wines, and as wines such as Zinfandel and Chardonnay were just coming on to the market, we entered.

'Funnily enough, last year a British Wine Master friend of mine amazingly produced a bottle of Zinfandel of that same vintage, 1980, and we opened it up. It was still pretty good.

'I grew up drinking good wines. My father was something of a bon vivant who'd come out here from Scotland in 1947 to practise as a doctor, but he had also bought the wine farm Hartenberg in Stellenbosch. In 1968 we started bottling our own wines and in '75 I joined Blaauwklippen and developed it as a wine estate.

'I have always been interested in top quality wines and what makes them stand out, and have been innovative in my approach. I was one of the first to start with small-barrel maturation. I made the first superior Pinot Noir partly because we used small French barrels.

'These days there is still a demand for quality wines. And, as I like to say, life is simply too short to drink poor wine! 🍷

To find out more about the wine weekend offer for members, email winemaker@dinersclub.co.za.