

# SIX MINDS ONE MISSION

*Crafting the Diners Club Winemaker of the Year Verdict*

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Meet the experts defining excellence in the Diners Club Winemaker of the Year and Young Winemaker of the Year competition.

The Diners Club Winemaker and Young Winemaker of the Year Awards have long been among South Africa's most respected wine honours, not only because of the trophies and flights to far-flung wine regions, but because they put the spotlight firmly on the people behind the labels. Established in 1981 and expanded in 2001 to recognise emerging talent, the awards celebrate winemakers across the country, with entries open at no cost – a rare level playing field in a fiercely competitive industry.

## HOW THE JUDGING WORKS

Each year, the competition homes in on specific categories – in 2025, Cabernet Sauvignon for Winemaker of the Year and White Wine for Young Winemaker. Wines are entered from across South Africa, vetted for compliance with production regulations, and then assessed blind over several rounds. From a substantial pool of entries, the judges narrow the field to a tightly curated shortlist before selecting the overall winners. The focus is not only on technical precision, but also on originality, age-worthiness and that elusive sense of place that separates competent wines from memorable ones.

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by **bernie hellberg jr**  
/ photography by **ryan abbott**





## CARRIE ADAMS

### *Panel Chair*

Carrie Adams brings a rare combination of retail experience, broadcast clarity and a palate honed over decades of tasting. As convenor, she sets the tone for the judging process, keeping the conversation focused, the arguments honest, and the verdicts consistent. Carrie's background in specialist wine retail gives her a sharp sense of value and market relevance, while her broadcasting work has made her a natural translator of technical nuances. She gravitates toward wines that show restraint and a genuine sense of place, and she encourages the panel to interrogate not only what's in the glass, but how convincingly it expresses origin. Her guiding hand ensures the room remains open to discovery while holding each wine to uncompromising standards.



## YEGAS NAIDOO

### *Judge*

Yegas Naidoo's international judging experience brings a valuable external lens to the panel. She has a precise, detail-driven approach to tasting, shaped by extensive studies and time spent evaluating wines across various continents. Her affinity for classic styles – particularly sparkling wine – gives her a strong sense of texture, structure, and age-worthiness. Yegas approaches every wine with quiet thoroughness, often focusing on how well a wine will hold its shape over time. She tests a wine's behaviour in practical terms too: whether it complements food, whether it maintains interest in a social setting, and whether it has the subtlety needed for longevity. Her global perspective helps benchmark South African entries against international standards without losing sight of local character.



## SHANE MUMBA

### *Judge*

Shane Mumba sits at the intersection of technical knowledge and market intuition. His work in brand advocacy and education – particularly within the brandy and broader luxury beverage space – has given him a clear understanding of how people experience flavour. Shane excels at linking a wine's technical strengths to its storytelling potential, often highlighting which wines carry a narrative that consumers can connect with. His experience in the restaurant and events circuit provides firsthand insight into shifting tastes and trends. On the panel, Shane brings a valuable question to the table: beyond technical polish, does this wine have the character, identity and emotional pull to stand out in a crowded market? His contributions often bridge the gap between cellar precision and real-world appeal.



### DENZEL SWARTS

#### *Judge*

Denzel Swarts' journey from farm worker's son to wine entrepreneur and community leader adds an authentic, deeply rooted perspective to the panel. He has spent years advocating for storytelling in wine – the belief that true value lies in how convincingly a wine reflects both its land and the people behind it. Through his work in youth development and brand building, Denzel has cultivated a profound respect for sustainability and heritage. In the judging room, he looks closely at how viticulture and winemaking decisions either preserve or dilute a wine's sense of place. He is especially drawn to wines that feel honest: those that communicate soil, climate and intention without unnecessary embellishment. Denzel's presence ensures that the conversation remains grounded in identity, not just technique.



### JOHANN FOURIE

#### *Judge*

Johann Fourie brings rigorous technical insight shaped by years of experience crafting cool-climate wines and leading large cellar teams. His approach is meticulous – he analyses tannin structure, fermentation detail and oak integration with the precision of someone who lives in both vineyard spreadsheets and barrel halls. Johann has an instinct for balance, particularly in varieties where structure can easily overwhelm fruit. On the panel, he often zeroes in on the fine print: phenolic maturity, purity of fruit, and whether a wine's architecture will support graceful ageing. Yet his perspective is not purely clinical. Johann has a deep respect for terroir expression and frequently highlights when a wine carries a clear signature of its origin. His voice ensures the panel remains anchored to technical integrity while still rewarding character.



### WAYNE BUCKLEY

#### *Judge*

Wayne Buckley's experience in sales, exports and tasting room leadership means he understands how wines live beyond the cellar. He has spent years guiding visitors, sommeliers and buyers through ranges of premium wines, giving him a sharp sense of what resonates with consumers. Wayne evaluates wines with an eye for completeness, focusing on quality, authenticity, and the ability to stand confidently on both local and international platforms. He thinks about how a wine will read on a restaurant list, how it will be positioned in a tasting, and whether its style aligns with modern drinking trends. His grounding in formal wine studies adds structure to his instinctive feel for market behaviour, making him the panel's barometer for commercial viability without compromising on quality. ⑩