

# Merlot in the blood

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"We made wine a part of their lives from very early on," says Overgaauw Wine Estate owner Braam van Velden of his four children. "Seated at the family table before their feet could touch the floor, they were always given a little bit of wine, albeit diluted, to enjoy with their dinner."



It's the kind of story you might expect to hear in France or Italy, not on a South African farm. But Overgaauw is the kind of place that differentiates the Cape from so many of its New World counterparts, boasting a history dating back to 1783 and a wine culture that now stretches over four generations.

'Cape European' is the term Van Velden uses to describe the wines and indeed the philosophy on this family-owned Stellenbosch Valley farm.

There's pioneering spirit, but there's also an Old World-like determination to stick with what is most suited to the farm regardless of international market trends.

"Over the years, we have identified which varieties do best on which sites, whether the market is asking for them or not. After all, there'll always be a market for quality wine, whether its Chenin Blanc or a Bordeaux-style blend," says Van Velden.

Or the Portuguese varieties planted in 1949 for the Overgaauw Cape Vintage, not to mention curiosities like Sylvaner: "It's the only Sylvaner left in South Africa but it still has a loyal following and we've been doing it for so long (since 1971) that it would be a pity to stop."

And then there's Merlot, arguably the world's most unfashionable red at the moment, partly thanks to its treatment in the movie 'Sideways' but also because it is dismissed (often erroneously) as a "lesser" component in Bordeaux-style blends such as Overgaauw's own Tria Corda.

However, the Van Veldens have 11,5 hectares planted to the variety and currently bottle more single-varietal Merlot than any other wine. And that's not just for sentimental reasons, even if they were the first to produce Merlot in South Africa.

"If we want to compete successfully in the international market, and earn respect, we have to go with Merlot," insists cellar master Chris Joubert. "Merlot is here to stay."

## The beginning

It was Van Velden's grandfather, Abraham, who founded Overgaauw Wine Estate in 1905.

"When he moved here from the neighbouring farm, there was nothing here just grazing land amidst the indigenous wild olive and stinkwood trees — so the first thing he built was a shepherd's cottage."

Van Velden himself lived in this quaint, green-gabled cottage when he first got married, and now both his daughters have had their turn.

Next to be built were the stables, followed by the cellar in 1909.

"Every farm needed to have its own cellar in those days. But there was also much more diversity back then we grew fruit, vegetables and table grapes as well as wine grapes. Only in the 70s did we decide to concentrate exclusively on wine."

It was Van Velden's father, David, who launched Overgaauw into this new era, taking over from Abraham in 1945. He initially continued to produce bulk wines, but also introduced some radical new technology along the way: "I remember my father buying his first tractor in the 50s," he recalls.

In 1969, David and Frans Malan of Simonsig visited Bordeaux to learn more about winegrowing and winemaking, and introduced the first small oak barriques to South Africa. These second-fill barrels — acquired at Chateau Latour, no less — were just one innovation introduced at Overgaauw as a result of that trip.

The estate started bottling under its own label in 1970; all that was now needed was some young blood, so in 1972 son Braam, armed with a BComm degree from the University of Stellenbosch, was sent to Germany to study Oenology and Viticulture at Geisenheim.

"Most of us went to Germany in those days because South Africa was still more white wine focused," he points out. "But it was at that time, touring around Europe, that I became interested in different wines and styles especially Bordeaux-style blends. We already had some Cabernet Sauvignon planted, and I thought if Cab did so well here then so should Merlot." "It's like Cab with the volume turned down," he quips.

### **The middle**

Van Velden took charge of winemaking in 1973 and planted the first Merlot vineyard in 1975. The result was Tria Corda, launched in 1979 and originally a Cab/Merlot/Cinsaut blend (with Cabernet Franc replacing the Cinsaut component in the 80s).

Unfortunately this Merlot vineyard was infected with leafroll virus, but the Van Veldens were eventually able to get hold of the new and improved Italian clone, which they planted in 1979.

"Our first vintage from this second block was 1982 and we were so happy with the results that we decided it was worthy of going into bottle on its own. First it spent nine months in oak a long time at that stage and when it was bottled in 1983, it was the first single-varietal Merlot on the market."

Van Velden says there were plenty of raised eyebrows: "I remember being asked why we were bottling a blending wine on its own."

But it was an exciting time of innovation generally, even if it occasionally resulted in run-ins with the previous generation: "When I first took over from my dad, red wine was made according to a recipe, in the sense that we were very specific about the time it had skin

contact we would remove the skins after so many hours regardless of whether it was in the middle of the night."

"Well, after I'd been making wine for a while, I remember my father coming into the cellar one day and saying that he wanted to taste the Merlot that we'd harvested last week. When I said it was still on its skins, he said I was mad the wine would be undrinkable!"

Van Velden obviously remembers the 70s with a great deal of fondness.

"At that stage, South Africa was still internationally acceptable," he says. "We exported our wines and our winemaking was influenced by world market trends — then came the 80s and sanctions. We could only sell our wine locally and as winemakers we had blinkers on."

But he brightens visibly when he recalls the dawn of democracy in the early 90s.

"Once again, world exposure and knowledge transfer have resulted in drastic changes in the style of our wines. There is so much information available these days that anyone with a computer who doesn't know what's going on in the industry must be stupid."

### **Not the end**

Far from stupid is Chris Joubert, Overgaauws award-winning winemaker since 1991 when Van Velden decided he needed to spend more time in the vineyards ("You can't produce good wines from mediocre grapes.").

But while stainless steel tanks and the latest equipment have made Joubert's job easier, he as an outsider is adamant that Overgaauw's biggest advantage is its heritage.

"We talk too little about history in this country," he says. Everyone always talks about the current vintage as if it's the best ever — to sell the wines, of course! But only by looking at history can we find answers, take ourselves forward, and develop a culture such as they have in France. At least Overgaauw already has four generations — that's something you can't buy."

Representing the new generation in the cellar is Braam's son David, assistant winemaker since 2003.

"Wine has been my passion since the moment I opened my eyes," he says (a passion fuelled, no doubt, by those sips of wine at family mealtimes). "The only thing I ever wanted to do was winemaking and viticulture, so I wasn't very impressed when my dad insisted that I do a BComm! But I soon realised that he was right making wine isn't just farming but a business."

Van Velden junior may have worked overseas under the legendary Hubert du Bouïard de Laforest of Chateau Angelus in St-Émilion, but he says his biggest mentors are his dad and Joubert.

Likewise, he says sampling the wines of Chateaux Angelus, Pétrus and Cheval Blanc was "a very humbling and inspiring experience ... but then I can say exactly the same of the 1970 Overgaauw Cabernet I tasted last year. And best of all, I could share it with my grandfather, the man who made it."

He, too, has a soft spot for Merlot but concedes that it hasn't found its feet in South Africa as it should have. The main problem, he reckons, is "if it gets a lot of heat quickly, the sugars shoot up before its phenolically ripe, and that's when you get those green, vegetal characteristics".

The key is to plant it in the right place which at Overgaauw is on south-facing slopes at 180m above sea level, where the wind lowers the temperature and extends the ripening time, in turn resulting in better extraction during vinification.

"If there are problems with the grapes, there's not much you can hide," agrees Joubert. "If we get it right, it has this amazing brightness and clarity of fruit. But because it's a medium-bodied wine, many people overlook a lot of its soft and subtle but complex flavour profile. You have to look much deeper than you do with an upfront Cab or Shiraz or Pinotage but Merlot is a class act."

And this is precisely why he believes local producers should be focusing more on Merlot, particularly if they want to make their mark internationally — "Not so much in the US, where people have a taste for blockbusters, but in Europe it's extremely important to offer wines with a more classic feel. Whether an elegant wine in its own right, or a softener in a blend, Merlot must not be overlooked."

It may not be in fashion, but it's got elegance, nuance and structure and that's what Overgaauw's Cape European philosophy is all about.

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*Tasting/sales: Mon-Fri 08:30-12:30 & 14:00-17:00, Sat 10:00-12:30* Page: 2 of 2 - [back](#)