

David Trafford

VINTAGE 20

Vintage 1992 was David Trafford's first 'official' vintage, if wines made for market is the criterion applied. But this qualified architect, who was still practising until a few years ago, has been making wine for close on 30 years if what started as a 'hobby' is factored into the equation.

It all began when his parents, Alastair and Mavis Trafford, bought the 200-hectare Mont Fleur farm in 1976, realising a long-held dream of establishing a wine farm. What was to become the home of De Trafford wines lies at the end of a winding, seemingly never-ending track through lush riverside vegetation and an oak forest up the narrow Blaauwklip Valley between the Stellenbosch and Helderberg mountains.

The family had moved down to the Cape from KwaZulu-Natal when David was 13. After completing his schooling at Diocesan College (Bishops), he went on to study architecture at the University of Cape Town.

While his father was converting former grazing land into what was to become one of the Cape's largest vine rootstock mother plantations to supply nurseries and other growers with new plant material, David started making red wine 'for consumption by family and friends'. He bought in grapes before he and his father decided to plant their own tiny vineyard in 1983: some three hectares of mainly cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot and pinot noir.

A record of his early 'trial and error' attempts, rendered with David's typically dry sense of humour, reads as follows: in '84 a barrel of cabernet exploded; the '85 crop refused to ripen 'and thankfully our entire production was stolen'; '86 sugars were

excessive and had to be diluted; '87 was lost entirely to the birds.

David graduated in 1988 and, while working for an architectural firm in London, spent the 1989 northern hemisphere pressing season at Château Soutard in Saint-Émilion, Bordeaux. Upon his return to Mont Fleur and an architectural career in Cape Town, he continued his weekend experiments with winemaking. He read up and gleaned practical tips from 'exceedingly kind and helpful but I think rather bemused, and perhaps frustrated vintners'. These included former Meerlust cellarmaster Giorgio dalla Cia and Etienne le Riche [a member of the Guild, which the persistent young winemaker was eventually invited to join in 2000].

RUSTIC SOPHISTICATION

David persevered with his 'rustic' methods. Vinifying only what could be made in barrel (thus focussing on reds initially), he kept things *au naturel*: using a homemade hand crusher/destemmer and a small basket press; fermenting in oak with wild yeasts only; employing a hand pump for gentle racking; fining with natural egg white; leaving his wines unfiltered; designing his own labels, affixed by hand.

In 1991 he constructed a small, partly underground winery tunnelled out of a slope. Until then he'd been using a cobwebbed outbuilding attached to his equally 'rustic' bachelor's pad, keeping an eye on his wines through a handy hatchway an arm's length from his architect's drawing board.

Vintage 1992 saw his first commercially made wines under the De Trafford label: a Cabernet, Merlot, Pinot Noir and a red



blend, released in 1993 under labels designed by the winemaker himself.

In the two decades since then, David has remained true to his original winemaking philosophy. Using non-interventionist methods in largely the same, essentially artisanal winery (now slightly expanded for storage), he remains intent on expressing a sense of place in his wines.

'I try to understand and work with the vineyard to coax something magical from the land; after that it's: hold thumbs I don't cock it up in the cellar.'

From his initial 300 cases he's 'grown' to just 3500 12-bottle packs of De Trafford wines. These still come from selected grapes from three specific Stellenbosch and Helderberg vineyards, as well as the original plantings on Mont Fleur's mountainsides.

A smidgen of shiraz and pockets more of cabernet, cabernet franc and merlot were subsequently added to bring the Mont Fleur vineyard to a grand total of five hectares. These high-lying young vines were planted on carefully chosen virgin soil and are the source of his signature De Trafford wines: the Syrah 393 and the Elevation 393 (a traditional Bordeaux mix of varieties with shiraz). The names refer to the home vineyard's altitude.

Shiraz, he confesses, is the variety that most enthralled him, and it shows: his De

'I never chose winemaking as a profession; it was thrust upon me. I chose architecture as a profession. But living on land with such great vineyard potential, it was impossible not to get involved in the wine business.'



Trafford Shiraz 2007, now renamed the Syrah 393, scored an almost unheard-of-for-the-Cape 95 [on the 100-point scale] in leading American wine publication *Wine Spectator* in 2010.

David continues to live with his wines, though as they gained in volume and stature, their maker retreated further up the gully to the homely but creative eyrie he designed and built right beside his shiraz vineyard at 'elevation 393 m' in 1999.

Back in 1990, upon his return to Mont Fleur and an architectural career in Cape Town, David had been 'somewhat taken aback' to find that one Rita von Thelemann, a young graduate of the Cape Town *cordon bleu* cookery school Silwood Kitchen, had been driving 'Mello Yellow', his much-beloved old Peugeot 404.

Rita, a former fine arts student from the University of Stellenbosch, was working for David's parents at their secluded Mont Fleur Conference Venue. [Now run by David's sister Lynne, it was built from a design David had done as a student practical and was to host some of the key negotiations between

political party leaders in the run-up to South Africa's first democratic elections in the early 1990s.]

'I saw Rita's CV before I saw her,' admits David with a bashful smile. They were married in 1994, spending a two-month honeymoon travelling in the European winelands, specifically Champagne and Saint-Émilion. Now the parents of teenage son Nicholas and young daughter Rosalyn, the two share a love of nature and all things creative, from art and design to food and wine (each vintage of the De Trafford Chenin Blanc features one of her artworks).

'Nicholas at 15 is quite into food and loves going out to good restaurants, while Rosalyn, who's 12, occasionally gets creative in the kitchen.' David was a dab hand in the kitchen himself 'until I married a qualified chef!' A few years ago it was his turn, though, after a Guild team tasting competition organised by fellow Guild member Bruce Jack saw David's 'team' win one of the famed 'men-only' Kitchen Cowboys cookery courses with South African celebrity chef Peter Goffe-Wood.

'There are so many things one can't do because one just doesn't have the time ... it's just life.'

The Traffords returned to the French wine-lands for a 'second honeymoon' in 2001 when David was given two air tickets to visit the Loire, the home of chenin blanc, as the winner of the 2000 Chenin Blanc Challenge with his De Trafford Chenin Blanc 1999.

David had added a wood-fermented Chenin Blanc to his repertoire in 1995, it being a white variety that could be made in barrel quite successfully, thus not necessitating any additional expenditure on expensive new winemaking equipment in a cellar geared towards making red wines. It also appealed to him as something new

to the Cape, an alternative to the increasingly ubiquitous chardonnay in providing a wooded white that could still express the natural fruit of the grape.

Although not overly keen on entering competitions and wine shows, he admits quite frankly that he entered the challenge mainly in the hopes of perhaps 'winning a trip to the Loire to explore chenin further'.

It was there he became convinced that naturally fruity South African chenin blanc, seriously treated in barrel to come into its own after just a few years in bottle, offered a unique alternative to the highly acidic Loire wines that required decades in bottle before becoming drinkable. Similarly, such serious Cape cheniens provided a pleasing new middle-of-the-road option in a market long dominated by full-bodied chardonnays on the one side and distinctively crisp, sometimes tart sauvignon blancs on the other.

David (by now a Guild member) duly repeated his Chenin Challenge success in 2002 with his Keermont 2001, sharing the award with another advocate of the potential of wooded chenin blanc, Teddy Hall [a fellow Guild member].

Hall had won the previous year, prompting David with his trademark dry wit to comment: 'At least it shows they got the [judging] panel right for the past three years.' Once asked how winemakers chose their best wine, he replied: 'The wine your wife likes.' But on a more serious note, he says his mission as a winemaker is simply: 'To express the vineyard and the vintage as completely as possible.'

David had also taken the opportunity during his Loire trip to taste sweet chenin blancs and visit the Jura, where he encountered *vin de paille* (straw wine) for the first time. He had already been trying his hand at something similar from sun-dried grapes since 1995. The De Trafford Straw Wine from chenin blanc, first released in the late 1990s after he had had to petition the wine industry to officially register this new wine category, was the first authentic *vin de paille* made in the Cape.

'Our straw wine is like a dessert on its own; I usually have it after I've had pudding. But it's also good with Rita's vanilla ice cream, orange cake and yoghurt; and cheese and biscuits and nuts ...'

'I took a bottle of our straw wine along on a trip to Tanzania to have at the top of Kilimanjaro in 2004. Alcohol at altitude is not wise, but we enjoyed the rest of the bottle in the Serengeti.'

One national wine competition De Trafford does occasionally enter is the SA Trophy Wine Show. And, in 2003, this tiny cellar, having won the trophy for best merlot and best cabernet sauvignon, as well as the merlot being judged best red tasted, shared top honours with vaunted corporate-owned winery Vergelegen as the most successful producer on show.

What these successes did do was justify his decision towards the end of the 1990s to devote himself full-time to winemaking (he had still been working as an architect, albeit from home). Even so, he continued to be drawn into accepting the odd project, mostly for noted Cape restoration architect John Rennie, as well as work for wineries (Glen-Wood and Meerlust's grappa cellar). 'Until a few years ago, when I finally realised I just couldn't keep on doing both.' Especially given that the Traffords had embarked upon an exciting, pioneering winemaking project.

SIJNN WINES

In 2001, while exploring up-river from the Breede River estuary on a weekend break on the Cape south coast, David recalls 'salivating when I saw the "pudding-stone" and broken slate soils reminiscent of

Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Priorat [Spain]' stretching along a plateau between Malgas and Cape Infanta.

The former ostrich and grain farm called Lemoentuin came on the market in 2003. Running from the plateau down to the Breede River, it was snapped up by the Traffords with backing from investors: environmental businessman Quentin Hurt and Simon Farr of UK importers Bibendum Wine. Some 15 hectares of naturally low-yielding bush vine reds suited to the Mediterranean conditions were planted: shiraz, mourvèdre, cabernet sauvignon, two port varieties also suitable for table wine (touriga nacional and trincadeira) and three whites (chenin blanc, viognier and roussanne).

The first, highly distinctive wines under the Sijnn label (the name by which the river was known by the region's former indigenous Khoisan inhabitants) were made in rented cellar space in Stellenbosch in 2007. The sole vineyard within a radius of 40 kilometres and quite unlike its nearest viticultural terroirs, it now forms part of the newly designated Malgas wine ward.

'Still a work in progress,' says David. But the aim is to eventually deliver three wines 'fully expressive of the already strong sense of place these early vintages are showing': a red, a white and a rosé. There is also a plan to build a small cellar there sometime: a good excuse for the architect vintner to pull his drawing board closer ...

