

# THE RISE OF THE SOMMELIER WINE GURUS

*Hilary Prendini Toffoli meets the professionals*



*Howard Booyesen, Khuselo Mputa, Miguel Chan, Josephine Gutentoft and Luvo Ntezo*

*Sommelier – pronounced som-mell-yay - is the French word for wine waiter. It's not just a fancy term. Wine that complements a well-prepared dish is an integral part of eating out. South Africa's new generation of sommeliers talk wine with Hilary Prendini Toffoli.*

A six-month stint at the Cellars Hohenort Hotel turned into a six-year stay in South Africa for **Mauritian-born Miguel Chan**, and now at 34 as group sommelier for the large Tsogo Sun chain, he's one of South Africa's most influential sommeliers. He's also co-founder of the new South African Sommeliers' Association.

"Forget the wine jargon," he says. "Enjoy wine the way you like, even if it's an ice cold red with fish and chips. Don't let wine braggers scare you away from enjoying a noble natural beverage. South African wines with their forward fruit character are sunshine in a bottle. Our finest straddle the best of Europe and the New World, and are the world's best value when you convert to dollars or euros. That won't last forever!"

"On the cork versus screwtop debate, I believe cork has environmental benefits as well as being a 100% natural renewal source."

**Best value:** "KWV's exciting new releases Bonne Esperance Red and Bonne Esperance White, both less than R25."

**Favourite:** "Limited production but KWV's The Mentors Grenache Blanc 2011 and 2010 is world class and a bargain at less than R 200."

**Charismatic Howard Booyesen**, 29, is one of three SA winemakers who featured in the local TV series Exploring the Vine which achieved international air time on the National Geographic Asia channel.

**South Africa's only winemaker** working as a sommelier - in the evenings at Aubergine restaurant - he makes wine under the Howard Booyesen Wines as well as Pegasus labels. "High altitude vineyards are our future so I chose my first wine to come from the amazing soils of the Swartberg. We should be more proud of our Cinsault grape. It's the base of our red wine industry - sexy when young, low alcohol, and will outlast any other cultivar when global warming hits. "As a winemaker I can explain the product in a way customers can relate to. The chemistry and wine-making methods. Smells versus flavours. Why certain regions and wine styles pair better with particular dishes. My worst food and wine pairing for example is soup. A consommé has hardly any texture plus a lot of flavour which is hard to counter. Only a rosé or fino sherry works."

**Best value:** "Louis Nel Black Forest Red Blend and Teddy Hall Summer Moments white. Two small independent producers who over-deliver for the R60 you're paying."

**Favourite:** "Raats MR de Compostella BDX blend is worth being rated the only six star wine in the southern hemisphere."

**One&Only sommelier Luvo Ntezo**, 29, was a pool attendant at Steenberg Hotel when he became fascinated by the process of transforming grapes into wine. Tutored by Steenberg's winemaker, then sent abroad to shadow a French sommelier, he's won awards and done a marathon blind tasting at the world championships in Vienna.

"Three quarters of the One&Only's 500 listed wines are South African. Our wines are blessed with fruit flavours and can be enjoyed in their youth, while they also age well. Our winemakers don't imitate French styles. They focus on what the terroir gives."

**Best value:** “KWV The Cathedral Merlot is a world class merlot, with explosive red cherry and fruit and softer tannins. Paul Cluver Riesling is a classic wine with green apple and floral undertones. Both under R70.”

**Favourite:** “Veenwouden Merlot reminds me of the finest wines of Pomerol and St Emilion. Chocolate, tobacco and black forest berries flavours. A wine I will only stop drinking when my wallet or my liver gives in.”

**One of several Swedish sommeliers** working in SA, **Josephine Gutentoft**, 34, is at Makaron restaurant at Majeka House in Stellenbosch, where 90 percent of the 150 listed wines are South African and 75 percent of those from Stellenbosch.

She studied wine in Australia. “I believe SA is producing wines that are lower alcohol, less oak-aged and with a better sense of terroir. It has never happened yet that a visitor who doesn’t know South Africa’s amazing wines hasn’t been impressed by what I’ve served them.

“I love it when wine is not just a beverage, but alive, changing character as you drink it, discussed around the dinner table.

“Don’t pair a fullbodied tannic red wine with a really spicy dish. It creates total fire in the mouth.”

**Best value:** “Kleine Zalze’s chenin blanc, R32, and Howard Booysen’s Pegasus Cinsault, R54, smooth on the palate and perfect with spicy food.”

**Favourite:** “Eben Sadie’s Palladius white is complex, terroir-driven with a beautiful but not sharp acidity, showing the characters of all the grape varieties.”

**As senior food and beverage manager** for South African Airways, **Bongi Sodladla**, 34, has a Cape Sommelier qualification and the tricky task of selecting wine for passengers to drink at 33,000 feet in pressurized cabins that dull the tastebuds.

“Because we don’t have a sommelier on all flights, I make sure my wine lists provide information to assist customers to make a confident choice. SAA only serves South African wines, with the exception of champagne. We have a wine list with 46 to 50 wines across different varieties. So there’s one for every kind of food.”

She’s all for screw caps. “They might diminish the romance but they eliminate corked and oxidation problems and ensure a taint-free wine that offers consistent ageing and flavour.”

**Best value:** “The fruity Glen Carlou Tortoise Hill Red 2008, about R45, and Anura Sauvignon Blanc, about R50, a crisp well-rounded white wine that’s amazing with seafood.

**Favourite:** “Joubert Tradauw Cabernet Sauvignon 2008.”

**Zimbabwean Gregory Mutambe**, 28, thought he might become an accountant like his father until he was offered work at a wine cellar in Marondera near Harare. “Wine found me.” After obtaining a Cape Sommelier diploma at the Cape Wine Academy he worked as a sommelier at Signature restaurant and the Vineyard Hotel and is now at the Twelve Apostles.

“Wine appreciation is a sweet lifestyle with health benefits. Wine rewards a moderate drinker and adds value to food. A good sommelier is a palate for the guests and a bridge between the wine farm and the consumer, yet in South Africa despite more than three centuries of winemaking, with skilled winemakers and a unique diversity of terroir, the local wine culture has not grown enough to support the services of sommeliers in every local eatery.”

**Best value:** “Pinot is notoriously difficult to grow and requires a cool climate so it’s usually pricey. Thelema’s Sutherland Pinot Noir 2010 has great complexity yet costs way less than R100. Waterford’s Pecan Stream Chenin Blanc 2011, under R60, is loaded with tropical fruit flavours that linger on the palate.”

**Favourite:** “Bouchard Finlayson Galpin Peak Tête Cuvée 2007. I am a great burgundy lover, and this is one of the greatest local equivalents.”

**Sommeliers are seen as an expensive luxury** in SA says Stellenbosch-born **Khuselo Mputa**, who has worked in the UK and for India’s Zuri Group, and is now a sommelier on the private Seychelles island where Prince William honeymooned with Kate.

“Some SA restaurants don’t regard even waiters as professionals. How can you expect to find a sommelier in a restaurant that employs students working for pocket money?”

**Best value:** “Chenin blanc offers the best value for money in South African wines. Winery of Good Hope Chenin Blanc, R53, is a good example. Capaia Blue Grove Hill Red, under R70, is a great Bordeaux blend.”

**Favourite:** “If I were to go on a wine war I would bring Hartenberg Gravel Hill, Sadie Family Columella, Raats Cabernet Franc, Cape Point Isleidh, Sadie Family Palladius and Ken Forrester FMC. These wines will fight and impress for years to come.”

After **Nicci Pain** obtained her Cape Sommelier certificate she chose a rather different sommelier route. “Salaries in the hospitality industry are poor, the hours shocking.” Instead she hires out her sommelier services for private tastings, wine list consultation and managing of wine cellars, while teaching CWA courses in Edenvale and running a wine club.

“The best way to make an unfinished bottle of wine last is to push the cork back in - or screw on the cap - and put the bottle in the fridge.”

She launched Nairobi’s annual wine festival in Kenya in 2008, the same year as the first Soweto Wine Festival. “I think it’s great that wine is being introduced to new drinkers. Now they can see it’s not just for the posh.”