

Der Laibach Merlot Lobgesang vom Wine Magazin Südafrika

Laibach etabliert sich immer weiter als einer der Top-Produzenten am Kap wenn es um Merlot geht. Mit den Jahrgängen 2003 und 2004 wurde bereits der Standard Merlot beim WINE Magazin zum besten Merlot Südafrikas ausgezeichnet. Auch der 2007 kam unter die Top Fünf im letzten Jahr und der Claypot Merlot wurde soeben in die Top Five von diesem Jahr gewählt.



Lesen Sie mehr über den Merlot Lobgesang und der Ladybird Hymne im Originalbericht weiter unten

Always top of the pile: Laibach Claypot Merlot

In the Merlot category tasting featured in the March issue of Wine magazine, Claypot Merlot 2009 from Stellenbosch winery Laibach is one of only five wines to be rated 4 Stars or better. When the same exercise was conducted in 2010, the standard label 2007 was again one of only five wines to rate 4 Stars or better. In fact, Laibach has always been close to the top of the pile when it comes to Merlot ever since the 2003 came up for assessment in 2006 and was rated 4½ Stars, effectively making it the best overall out of the 69 examples assessed from that vintage.

The Ladybird

If you're not familiar with Laibach, however, don't beat yourself up. The wine that is making the property famous is its Bordeaux-style red blend made from organically grown grapes called The Ladybird. Sporting striking packaging - the capsule is red with black dots à la the carapace of its namesake - it now amounts to 7 500 cases a year, over 30% of Laibach's total production (and there's also a Ladybird White, the yet-to-be released 2010 being the first vintage officially certified as "organic").

"I suspect Ladybird is a more established brand than Laibach," says winemaker Francois van Zyl. Made for the first time in 2003, the 2007 vintage won best red at the inaugural Nedbank Green Wine Awards in 2009 and its following just keeps on growing. "We do a special bottling for [retail chain] Woolworths and they move 6 000 bottles a month during winter." The currently available 2009 vintage rated 3½ Stars in the 2010 Green Wine Awards and sells for R85 a bottle from the tasting room.



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Organic viticulture

Production of Claypot Merlot 2009, meanwhile, was a mere 450 cases (up from 50 cases of the maiden 2005 vintage and set to be capped at around 850 cases in future). The wine sells for R200 a bottle is the best that the property can do.

If terroir counts for anything, then Laibach, which has Kanonkop and Warwick as its neighbours, should be capable of some halfway decent wine. Viticulturist-cum-farm manager Michael Malherbe has been incumbent since the property was first established in 1994, and began the conversion process to organic in 2000, convinced that this was necessary if the wines were truly to reflect their place of origin. There are 42ha under vineyard and these will all be officially organic by 2012, bar a small portion that cannot qualify on the basis of being within 15m of conventionally farmed neighbours. Recent innovations on the part of Malherbe include worms that feed on a mixture of grape pomace and cow dung to produce highly concentrated compost and the use of a parasitical mould to combat downy mildew instead of traditional copper and sulphur sprays.



More of what goes on in the vineyard

When it comes to explaining why local Merlot is a perennial under-performer, it is often argued that it is particularly prone to water-stress but Laibach is unirrigated, thus belying this theory. As to why Laibach can get away without irrigation, Van Zyl points to the property's water-retaining clay soils. "Our vines have deep root systems and give us smaller berries with thicker skins, which all make for more expressive wines."

At Laibach vine canopies are naturally in balance (little "tipping and topping" required) and yields are never more than eight t/ha - the equivalent of one bunch per shoot; Van Zyl reckons that the tendency towards over-cropping is a big reason why local Merlot so often disappoints: "It's a mistake to think that a very leafy canopy will necessarily ripen a big crop. You need to get sunlight and air onto the bunches."

Though Claypot 2009 has an alcohol by volume of 14.5% on the label, Van Zyl reckons the "sweet spot" is at 14%. "Picking over-ripe is a symptom of lazy winemaking. You get plenty of fruit and tannins but the resulting wines all start to taste the same and they don't last." That said, getting full ripeness in South Africa is difficult, if not impossible. "If you believe in phenolic ripeness under local conditions, then you



believe Tiger Woods is a virgin.”

About the winemaking

Another key insight that Van Zyl provides is that Merlot is notoriously difficult to de-stem, and he consequently undertakes a hand-sort just before crushing, typically removing 100kg of “green” matter per five tons of grapes, far more than would be the case with Cabernet Sauvignon, for instance.

As for how Van Zyl works in the cellar, his approach is very much influenced by a season spent in Pomerol, traditional home of the variety, opting in particular for a fairly extended post-ferment maceration of around 30 days. In the case of the 2009, it contains 10% Cabernet Sauvignon and spent 16 months in French oak, 50% new and the rest a combination of second- and third-fill barrels. “I use Darnajou barrels as used by Cheval Blanc, Petrus and Pingus.” Claypot might not be in the same class just yet but it’s worth tracking down a bottle of what is one of South Africa’s best contemporary examples of Merlot.



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