

On 2nd February the wine industry hosted its annual celebration commemorating Jan van Riebeeck's first grape harvest in 1659 - a date noted in his diary, and therefore recorded with far greater historical accuracy than the sack of Troy, or even the moment when the legendary champagne-producing monk of the Abbey of Hautvillers first "tasted the stars." It's no secret that since that auspicious day 359 years ago all has not been plain sailing for the country's producers. Nowadays, especially, things are tough: prices remain resolutely low and the majority of producers are losing money.

This is not the kind of industry which should attract people who have been smart enough to make money elsewhere, yet much of the new investment comes from cash-flush outsiders. Interestingly, many of these newcomers do well, either because there was some kind of synergy between what they used to do (Ken Forrester was a restaurateur with real knowledge of the trade) or because their business skills matched the requirements of their new work environment. Wendy Appelbaum (DeMorgenzon) and G. T. Ferreira (Tokara) have achieved vinous and commercial success because both have a meticulous sense of detail, a knack of assembling the right team and a facility for using the networks developed over a lifetime in business.

The success of Glenelly - also in Stellenbosch - fits with this paradigm, but has its own unique features. Like Tokara and DeMorgenzon, Glenelly has benefited from a visionary investor with the kind of capital you need if you aim to transform the landscape. However, proprietor May-Eliane de Lencquesaing comes from a wine-producing family, which used to own several of the most important of the Medoc chateaux. In 1978 she inherited Chateau Pichon Lalande, on paper one of the region's best properties. However, by the time it came into her hands it was run down and in need of investment and a dedicated proprietor. By dint of extraordinary energy and relentless pursuit of quality she transformed Pichon into one of Bordeaux's great estates, earning at the time the sobriquet Madame la Generale (a reference as much to the force of her personality as to the military rank of her husband.)

Following several visits to South Africa in the 1990s, and having witnessed the success of Cape wines at the International Wine and Spirit Competition, she purchased a rundown fruit farm in Ida's Valley in Stellenbosch in 2003. She was 78. Given her background, she could not have been under any illusion about what it would take to turn virgin land into a productive wine estate. The winemaker she employed to make sense of the multi-million investment was Luke O'Cuinneagain. The wine she served him to benchmark her expectations was an 1873 Lafite Rothschild. This was to be no ordinary job, nor was this an employer with ordinary expectations.

Luckily for Madame de Lencquesaing she comes from long-lived stock. Beyond that, little was left to chance. O'Cuinneagain's first vintage of the flagship red, the Lady May, was produced from the new plantings in 2008. It took as long to settle down as a comparable wine from Bordeaux. A little gawky in its youth, it is now splendid. A few years back it was included in the line-up for the UK Master of Wine blind tasting examination. Apparently the majority of the candidates decided that it was from a northern Medoc appellation, either Pauillac (home of Chateaux Pichon Lalande and Lafite Rothschild) or St Estephe (which lies on the northern boundary of Lafite).

In my opinion it is the most successful of the Glenelly reds currently available, though the 2009 emerged with a Platter 5 Star award and a host of other accolades. The estate's only white wine is Chardonnay - available in unwooded and reserve (oaked) bottlings: both very good, and both, like the Lady May, better for several years of bottle age. The fine wine business is clearly not for investors - or consumers - worried about running out of time.