

The death last week of Giulio Bertrand came as a surprise to many in the industry who had come to regard him as “possibly immortal.” Despite his 91 years he was remarkably energetic, dividing his time between Italy, where he was born, and Morgenster, his estate in Somerset West. He had been in the Cape for the harvest. He stayed for the release of the new vintages of the property's wines, an event that in the end he was unable to attend because he had fallen and injured himself - not badly, but badly enough to have visible bruising. He had no intention of standing in front the press and trade looking anything but his best.

Giulio Bertrand bought Morgenster when he was in his mid-sixties and spent the last 25 years of his long life transforming the historic property (with a famous manor house and not much else) into a leading wine estate. It took longer than he expected, and cost far more than he imagined it would when he made the purchase. Since the early 1990s was not a time when foreign investors were queuing up to buy land in South Africa, his initial purchase price would seem low by today's standards. However, the subsequent investment in establishing vineyards, cellar construction and building a brand would certainly have taken the word “bargain” out of the equation.

His vision was based on the Bordeaux chateau model, with a single Grand Vin and a second wine comprising whatever didn't make the cut for the first label. This meant that for at least a decade he eschewed the idea of any products which would ease the cash flow burden of developing the brand from scratch. Finally he introduced a number of other wines - a few because he sought to find an Italian fit (though their volumes were always low) but more recently to have something in the range which could be sold within a year or two of the harvest.

At the new vintage launch a few weeks back I was struck by how good some of these were - and what extraordinary value they represented. Most notable was the unwooded sauvignon blanc, which was simply delicious. Then I remembered that Peter Bairnsfather-Cloete - from whose family Bertrand had purchased Morgenster - had only one block of vines of any consequence on the property, and it was a source of voluptuous, intense sauvignon.

Of the other, more everyday wines, the sangiovese is the perfect accompaniment to pizza-pasta. It can be treated with less reverence than the Tosca, a more premium offering, which, like many so-called “supertuscans” has been beefed up with Bordeaux varieties. The Nabucco on the other hand (the “N” to indicate “nebbiolo”) is stylistically close enough to the great wines of Piedmonte with which it shares in common the nebbiolo grape.

Giulio Bertrand's two great achievements in the quarter of a century he spent at Morgenster are the property's Grand Vin (simply called “Morgenster”), an unshowy but profoundly satisfying Bordeaux blend, mainly fashioned on the structure of Chateau Cheval Blanc (whose *directeur* Pierre Lurton was both his friend, and the cellar's consultant) and the olive oil. The latter was introduced almost immediately after he purchased Morgenster, partly because it was as much a passion as the wine, partly because he saw the opportunity to make a statement at a time when the local olive oil industry was largely in its infancy. He imported the best varieties, created his own olive nursery, and distributed the planting material extensively.

Morgenster became the source of roughly 90% of the olive trees in South Africa now yielding oil for the country's booming and highly successful olive oil industry. Bertrand's

own olive groves have produced one of the world's most highly rated oils pretty much every year since the turn of the century.

Few people achieve in a lifetime what Giulio Bertrand managed to do in the years normally set aside for retirement.