

THE LADIES IN THE CELLAR

'We got doctors, lawyers, politicians too.' Thanks Annie and Aretha. We've also got mighty fine winemakers, says **Lorraine Kearney**

In ancient history, women were crucial to making wine – in Egypt, tomb paintings show women in the vineyards and cellars; in Greece women were in charge of household winemaking. They held important roles in Canaan, Mesopotamia and Israel.

But then it became a mostly male escapade. Though there have been a fair few female dynamos shaking things up through the centuries. In France, Barbe-Nicole Clicquot (1777–1866) is known as the 'Grande Dame of Champagne' and Lalou Bize-Leroy (1932–) is known as the 'Grand Dame of Burgundy'.

But we were having it first. In 1682, Katarina (or Catharina) Ustings Ras was given Steenberg Farm in Cape Town, though she called it Swaaneweide,

and planted vineyards; in 1724, Anna de Koningh inherited Groot Constantia from her husband when he died. Anna was a remarkable woman, born to an enslaved woman in Batavia (Jakarta today), she became a formidable presence in the Cape.

Norma Ratcliffe of Warwick Wine Estate is hailed as the first female winemaker in South Africa, releasing her debut, La Femme Bleu Cabernet Sauvignon, with her husband in 1984.

LEADING LADIES

Carmen Stevens, who grew up on the Cape Flats, is the first woman of colour winemaker in South Africa; she has been making wine since 1995. She set up her own company, Carmen Stevens Wines, in 2011 with her maiden vintage in 2014.

Ntsiki Biyela is the first black woman winemaker in the country. She joined Stellakaya in 2004 and today has her own company, Aslina Wines. Interestingly, Ntsiki was born and raised in Mahlabathini, a small rural village in KwaZulu-Natal.

She's not the only daughter of those rolling green hills making big waves in South Africa's wine sector. Powerhouse Praisie Dlamini of Adama Wines and Her Wine Collection comes from a sugarcane farm in northern KZN.

Nongcebo 'Noni' Langa, the winemaker at Delheim, is from Pietermaritzburg. She was named the white wine Diners Club Young Winemaker of the Year 2023.

Mahalia Kotjane hails from Vosloorus in Gauteng – another unexpected

backstory. She became interested in fermentation of fruit during a school science project.

As you would expect, many women of colour winemakers come from the Cape Winelands.

Kiara Scott, who turned rosé on its head and racked up the awards at Brookdale, is one. Kiara, named Diners Club Young Winemaker of the Year 2024, has since moved to Hazendal.

Natasha Williams, winemaker at Hasher Family Wines in Hemel en Aarde, grew up in Saron. It's a tiny mission station village in the Swartland, 'on the other side of the Saronsberg to Tulbagh', she explains.

A FEW FAVOURITES

Mahalia: 'My favourite grape is Shiraz/Syrah. With my wine brand the idea is to be a niche, premium Syrah producer. It's the backbone of my wines.'

Natasha: 'Definitely Chardonnay and Syrah. I can't really choose between the two, but those are definitely my love.'



ECHOES OF HOME

These women keep their heritage close to their hearts. Aslina Wine's Umsasane, a Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot blend, is the isiZulu word for umbrella tree, which gives shelter, protection and comfort.

It was Ntsiki's grandmother's nickname and the bold structure, smoothness and complexity of this wine honour the characteristics of Aslina, the matriarch of the family.

Natasha's personal project is Lelie van Saron, with clear references to her home. And the design of the label is based on the doileys her mom had crocheted as a way of earning some money.

She has also set up Lalela Wines with her fiancé, Wade Sanders, the winemaker at Brunia Wines.

These women are all focused on making sumptuous but approachable wines.

Talking approachable, wine is often seen to be somewhat intimidating and, well, snobbish. But really, it shouldn't be. 'Wine is a consumable product; at the end of the day, it's all about your taste and your preference,' says Natasha.

About tasting, Mahalia is both practical and instinctive. Smelling your food was frowned upon in her culture, but even so, she was not exposed to things like gooseberries. She found it difficult to identify the aromas in wine.

Queue many visits to the markets to smell the fruits. But also, she advises, explore your own memory bank.

'I grew up eating sour porridge ... [and] when I was working with malolactic fermentation, for me it has that smell. Many people won't understand it because they didn't grow up eating sour porridge.'

Malolactic fermentation is the secondary fermentation, when bacteria convert the tart malic acid in grapes into softer lactic acid, reducing the wine's acidity and creating a rounder, smoother mouthfeel.

Her brand, Three Quarters Wines, is named for her birth order – the third

pregnancy but the fourth child, as her elder siblings are twins.

Before Three Quarters Wines, Mahalia was winemaker at Stark-Condé Wines and Lievland Vineyards.

DIGGING DEEPER

How to be a good winemaker? 'Have passion – you need to have a heart for it – get exposure,' says Mahalia.

Natasha speaks about attention to detail. 'A big factor that they don't really teach you in varsity is being practical ... and you need to be fine with the fact that you are going to get dirty.'

Resilience, patience, faith – these are other words that tumble out.

Build good networks in the industry. There's not a 'women winemakers club', but they generally have each other's backs.

Another exciting development: a lot of women winemakers are choosing to go their own way and are establishing their own labels. Look out for them when next you're on a wine-buying expedition. Sisters gotta do it for themselves, right?



Have A Taste

If you're in Stellenbosch, The Wine Arc (thewinearc.co.za) only stocks black-owned wine brands.

Novel Wine Bar in Salt River stocks many wines from winemakers of colour and black-owned brands.

novelwinebar.co.za

In Joburg, Proud Mary (proudmary.co.za) has some on its wine list and Vinosity (vinosity.co.za) stocks many

wines from winemakers of colour. Aslina Taste Pack 1, R263.33 (Ultra Liquors and aslinawines.com)

Aslina Umsasane 2021, R395 (Ultra Liquors and aslinawines.com)

Carmen Stevens Wines Julie Rosé 2023, R115 (Makro and Norman Goodfellows)

Carménère 2022 – W.O.

Wellington, R522 (Makro and Norman Goodfellows)

Lelie van Saron Chardonnay, R279 (Norman Goodfellows, Vinosity and winecellar.co.za)

Hasher Nauticus Sauvignon Blanc 2024, R180 (winecellar.co.za)

Her Wine Collection Sauvignon Blanc, R89 (Norman Goodfellows)

Her Wine Collection Chenin Blanc, R89 (Norman Goodfellows)

Adama Her Shiraz, R94.99 (Woolworths)

Three Quarters Syrah 2023, R285 (Norman Goodfellows and Vinosity)

