

SA Wine Legend: Pieter Ferreira

“Bubbles have consumed my life,” says Pieter Ferreira. It’s not an overstatement. Widely known as Mr Bubbles; Graham Beck’s cellar master has been on the bubble for 30 vintages. Coming in from the street, he shakes rain out of his hair. We sit down by the fireplace in a wine bar in Stellenbosch, with a glass of each of MCC, of course.

He’s just come from a Cap Classique think tank. As chairman of the Cap Classique Association and the driving force behind South Africa’s most famous bottle-fermented bubbly—if he’s not thinking about MCC, or making it, he’s drinking it.



There was a time though before this all-consuming obsession. Born in Durban the self-confessed ‘surfer dude’ loved science, so it was off to the University of Pretoria to study microbiology and plant sciences.

As the story goes he narrowly missed becoming a dentist when good friend and mentor Jan Boland Coetzee, organised an opportunity for him to work as an apprentice to Achim von Arnim of Clos Cabriere in Franschhoek.

It was his first winemaking gig, and naturally he was nervous. Jan reassured him by saying: “it’s not really what you know at first that matters, but it’s the experience of what you build up in your life.”

He spent seven years at von Arnim’s side during which they launched the Pierre Jourdan brand. During this time he also experienced a number of vintages in Champagne: at Mumm in 1987 and at Moët & Chandon in 1989.

“I focused on MCC from day one; and the bubbles got in my blood.”

Franschhoek proved to be good for his personal life too. He met his wife Ann there. The pair have been married for over two decades and have two children, William and Kate. It’s not just poetic license when I say his eyes light up when he talks about his wife. Genuine pleasure suffuses his being. He tells me how he proposed on a park bench in Champagne. “I carried a bottle of Dom Perignon 1978 all the way from SA with me.”

One day back in Franschhoek Jan Boland Coetzee told him about this ‘little wine farm in Robertson’. They went up there to meet with the late Graham Beck, and over few glasses of chardonnay, his destiny was decided. In 1990 he joined Graham Beck as winemaker. “I never even went for a formal interview.”

Ferreira says it was Beck’s mission to produce the best bubbly in the world outside of Champagne. “So no pressure at all,” says Ferreira laughing. But then as he knows bubbly is all about pressure. “He taught me to concentrate on what you do best.”

“Graham Beck was a visionary; how did a coal miner work out that Robertson was the place for bubbles?”

“You know it has the highest natural limestone soil in the Western Cape? That’s why we can make beautiful bubbles in a warm climate.”

Ferreira flies the flag for MCC as a whole. “Graham Beck and many other local Cap Classique producers are proving that South Africa has what it takes. We’ve developed a uniquely New World style, while remaining true to the essence, technique and tradition of fine fizz. I really try and capture the intrinsic fruit characteristics of the base wine varieties. At the end of the day you should be drinking the authentic style of the wine, not aiming for showmanship. With bubbly it’s even more vital to create that finesse and delicacy. The smaller you can create that bubble, the better the chances that the wine will develop the necessary delicate and complex flavours.”

Ferreira has undoubtedly done something right. Graham Beck has raked in a multitude of awards and critical acclaim over the years. One of the highlights of his career was the selection of Graham Beck Brut NV for the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela in 1994. Another presidential coup was when his MCC was enjoyed by Barack and Michelle Obama prior to the Acceptance Speech in 2008.



With over 30 years of experience bubbling away in Ferreira’s blood; just how does he plan to continue the legacy set out by himself and Beck all those years ago?

“I’ve started to develop a succession plan. Though it’s true that certain things are intangible; there’s one thing that never lies—your palate. That’s another take away from my time with Graham Beck, he always said, ‘trust your palate’.”

He’s earmarked Graham Beck winemaker, Pierre de Klerk as his successor. “If you want to be a good bubbly maker its simple, only do bubbles, it’s a speciality. I’m a bubbly specialist.”

Looking back over the last 30 vintages Pieter says he’s still on a quest ‘to find the perfect bubble’. “We’re close,” he says with a smile.

Spend some time with Mr Bubbles and you’ll soon find yourself wondering if he got the nickname from working with bubbly; or because he’s so bubbly.

“When my feet hit the ground in the morning, I’m already celebrating.”

- **Malu Lambert**