

Odd Gunnar Skagestad:

The Exquisite Merlot from Petrus Place

What could possibly induce a Swiss couple – both veterinarians, successfully practising their profession for more than 20 years - to break up from a safe, well-established and in every respect OK existence in their native country, to start a new life as wine-makers in South Africa? The spirit of adventure, perhaps? Or restlessness, an excessive drive or urge to seek new challenges? Or could it be the lure of a fancied carefree and sybaritic existence as wine-drinking epicureans? The blissful pleasures of spending their days in a paradisaical landscape with the Earth's most comfortable climate?

We simply had to check it out!

This is how it came about that we - the author and his family – on a sunny afternoon in late January, 2008, came to make a visit to *Petrus Place*. The place, which is owned and run by Luca and Ingrid Bein, turns out to be a modest-sized wine estate in the Stellenbosch wine district, approximately 50 km to the east of the metropolis of Cape Town. The Lady of the Estate – the hostess herself (“Call me Ingrid!”) – makes an immediate pleasant impression as an enthusiastic guide, showing us around between the lovingly nurtured vines, among the brightly shiny equipment in the spotless production hall and in the impeccably tidy wine cellar. She welcomes us into the beautiful whitewashed Cape Dutch main building, invites us to sit down around the table in the elegant guest hall, and starts pouring samples of wine in our glasses...

...While at the same time relating the story of the place, - about today's operations and the story behind.

- It all started, she recollects, when she and her husband Luca more than 20 years ago for the first time came to South Africa as tourists, and became completely infatuated with the overwhelming and radiating beauty of the sunny landscape. There would be many more visits before they dared making the great leap, and bravely purchased the small (2,2 hectares) property in the heart of the Cape winelands. And to this place they moved house, fast determined to make their great dream and passion come true – to become makers of wine. To learn the skills of the trade and the art was easier said than done, but Luca and Ingrid Bein went about it systematically and with persistent tenacity: The renowned Stellenbosch University in the next-door neighbourhood offers professional training on the highest levels. Having enrolled as students, the brave couple applied their Swiss diligence and perseverance to the task of mastering their new chosen profession. After years of demanding studies, they earned their bachelor diplomas in viticulture and oenology.

And that was all it would take to get started? Not quite. Like other countries, also South Africa is endowed with a bureaucracy with the responsibility of overseeing that everything goes by the book. For wine farmers and wine producers, there are rules, requirements and regulations that must be adhered to. Ingrid and Luca experienced that the South African bureaucracy is an exacting, but serious and orderly institution – occasionally even a helpful partner. In 2002, the Beins could finally claim their reward: The bottling of the first harvest of the wine that would be named the *Bein Merlot*. A wine with a bouquet that would reflect the deep, rich granite soil of the estate's *terroir*. – Conceived and born in passion, notes Ingrid, looking us straight in the eyes with a radiant smile. We believe her.

But belief is one thing, facts may occasionally be something different. “The proof of the pudding is in the eating”, as the English say. The same applies to wine – the taste remains the ultimate test of a successful product.

At this stage, it must be admitted that the Skagestad family arrived with a slightly biased history; with prior experience with the Bein Merlot, we knew what to expect. And after having completed the classical sequence of gazing, sniffing, sipping, gargling and (progressively increasing) swallowing, the unanimous verdict could only be that the old adage *in vino veritas* was most appropriate.

The walls in the Petrus Place guest hall are adorned with diplomas and certificates that bear witness of a rich harvest of medals and awards at international wine fairs. And our hostess makes no attempt to hide that the key concept of their enterprise is *quality*. The cultivation is based on ecological principles. Each separate vine is treated individually. Inferior clusters of grape (and individual grapes) are sorted out and discarded – only the very best raw material is allowed to be further processed and turned into those precious and delicious drops that eventually would find their way into the bottles. And the whole operations are conducted in a scientific manner, with state-of-the art production equipment and methods.

The purchase of the property, and the subsequent university studies and investments in seedlings, production hardware etc., made noticeable inroads in the couple's savings. Nevertheless, Ingrid proudly tells us that they have managed without having to resort to borrowed money. As things look at the present, it seems that the operations will go in break-even, or may even show a tiny surplus.

The annual production is now approximately 12-14 thousand bottles, mostly Merlot, although a minor quantity rosé wine (named “Bein Pink Merlot”) is also produced. The Beins have no plans to increase the capacity, - that would only happen at the expense of the quality – something which they would definitely not allow! - And besides, Madame Ingrid adds with a youthful smile that belies her words, - neither are Luca and I getting any younger as the years go by!

The work force – the couple themselves included – comprises only half a dozen persons, a number which increases with 15-20 seasonal workers during harvest time. We are told that the overwhelming bulk of the production is exported, mostly to Switzerland. In addition, some of the produce also finds their way to a few select gourmet restaurants in Southern Africa. And here lies the explanation to the puzzle of how it came about that the Skagestad family – visitors from far-away Norway – managed to locate this absolute gem of a wine estate: On a balmy evening in October 2005 my wife and the undersigned happened to be in Windhoek, Namibia, where we partook of a sumptuous meal at the evocatively pleasant and culinary first-rate *Gathemann's* Restaurant. There and then we decided to try a Merlot, which the establishment's *sommelier* most amiably saw fit to recommend. It was an immediate success – so much that next time we visited South Africa (the home country of this particular wine), we were determined to find out where it could be obtained. That turned out to be a taller order than had been expected. In Cape Town's wineries and bottle stores, the brand – and the producer – were seemingly totally unknown. Eventually, however, our investigations yielded results: We succeeded in unwrapping the secret that Bein Merlot could be found at the little restaurant *Manuka Café* (which also has its own small winery) at the suburb of Steenberg, some 20 kilometers to the south of Cape Town.

Subsequent searches on the Internet (www.beinwine.com) disclosed additional and useful information. Thus, we learned that the owners of the wine estate welcome visitors, who are encouraged to take contact in advance for appointment. This may be done by email to lib@beinwine.com. This was exactly what we did, with the result that we received a most pleasant welcome and got this unforgettable experience at the Petrus Place wine estate when we first came there in 2008. It was an experience deserving of an encore. Needless to say, we enjoyed an equally warm welcome and equally charming impressions during our next visit to South Africa in 2009.

In recent years, South Africa has become a favourite tourist destination for many Norwegians, including wine *aficionados*. For those who fancy the tasting of quality wine in combination with experiencing the unique scenic beauty of the Western Cape winelands on a spot with a fascinatingly distinctive stamp, exuding an exquisitely pleasant atmosphere – the trip to Petrus Place is strongly recommended.

According to the label of the bottle (Bein Merlot, vintage 2005), the wine keeps an alcohol content of 14 volume percent. Reading further, we learn that this is a “*Barrel matured classic dry red wine, fullbodied and complex. This fine Merlot partners well with red meat and cheese. Can be enjoyed young, but will continue to grow with age*”. Sounding plausible enough, but how can the wine best be described? If an amateur should be allowed to make a try, something in the following vein might give an indication: “Deep violet-red. Spicy fruitiness, featuring hints of dark berries and plums, an inkling of tar, chocolate, vanilla and oak”. And a pleasantly rasping after-taste, which lingers on the palate exactly long enough... But, - this is still a *young* wine! Can one believe the assurances that it “will continue to grow with age”? One can always hope.

In any case, this is a wine which makes you want to renew the acquaintance. Certainly the undersigned and his family have become devotees!

A good wine may be well worth a long journey. Nevertheless, it would be even more practical if it were also obtainable in one's local neighbourhood. So far, the Bein Merlot has not been visible on the Norwegian Wine Monopoly's shelves. It would be a good deed if that stronghold of vineous business, taste and propriety could be induced to include it in its assortment.