



BROADBENT

◆ SELECTIONS ◆

Rot. By Adam Lechmere

SMART WINES: Ten Years of Vilafonté

A tasting of Vilafonté Series C from 2003-2012, with Zelma Long, Phil Freese and Mike Ratcliffe. London 16 July 2014

By ADAM LECHMERE // July 25, 2014



Mike Ratcliffe, Zelma Long and Phil Freese



Vilafonté vineyards

Zelma Long says she's reading a book by furniture maker Peter Korn, called *Why We Make Things And Why It Matters*. 'He talks about his craft and how he uses his heart, his intellect and his hands and how this fulfills a basic human need to exercise the emotional, the physical and the intellectual.' She finds winemaking the perfect route to this rather practical karma.

The head, the heart and the hands. It's tempting to stretch the analogy (possibly to breaking point) to see which of these roles is filled by the trio that founded Vilafonté. Long and her husband Phillip Freese met Mike Ratcliffe of Warwick Estate in Stellenbosch in the 1990s, and some time after that they decided they should make wine from the ancient soils of the northern flank of the Simonsberg Mountain. They bought 40ha in 1997, and plant-

ed to four Bordeaux varietals, leaving out Petit Verdot. 'We knew the site would produce rich enough wines,' Freese says.

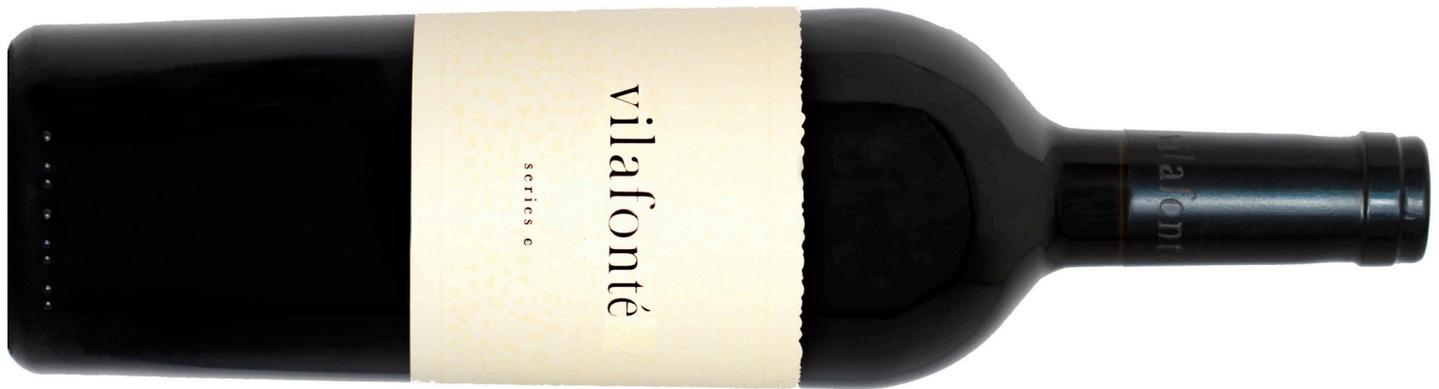
They share out the jobs: Long is the winemaker, Freese in the vineyard, and Ratcliffe on marketing. They're very good at what they do. Ratcliffe for one is a tireless ambassador for the winery, for Warwick and for South African wine in general. The fact he's a born marketeer is evidenced by the tasting mat in front of me, where each wine is labelled with a two-word plug, 'seamless and firm' for the 2010, 'balanced and expressive' for the 09 and so on. I'd say he's the head, in our (stretched) analogy.

Freese was Mondavi's vineyard guru for 13 years, designed and planted Opus One's vineyards next door, and likes his technological aids. He pioneered a ground-penetrating radar system called EM38 which detects variations in soil, they use the Leaf Water



BROADBENT

◆ SELECTIONS ◆



Potential measuring system, as well as deploying the Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI), a system developed by NASA, which uses satellite imaging to measure relative vigour of the vines. He has that rare gift of combining vast knowledge with an avuncular manner and an ability to explain complex subjects simply. Vine stress, he says, is a matter of 'subjecting the vines a near-death experience without them actually dying. They're psyched out by that.'

Long herself is measured of speech and quick to laugh. Her career started in the late 60s with UC Davis, an internship with Mike Ggrich at Mondavi, an offer of a job, a decade there as chief winemaker, subsequently CEO of Simi in Sonoma, founded Long Vineyards with Bob Long, a host of international consultancies, together with Vilafonté. She's now embarked on a PhD in performance art at Davis, because, she says, 'If you're a confident individual with an active mental capacity you need new challenges through your life.'

Vilafonté is a 42ha vineyard planted on 'vilafonté' soil, which according to Ratcliffe

is one of the oldest soil types in the world, between 750,000 and 1.5m years old. 'It has been stripped of much of its inherent capacity, with a low production potential.'

They make two wines, the Merlot-dominant Series M and the Cabernet Sauvignon-based Series C.

The vineyards are the highest-density in South Africa. Vines are stressed, berries are small and intensely-flavoured. 'Smart wines,' Robert Joseph said as we tasted. You have the feeling you're in good hands. There was not a single disappointment in the ten-year line up. 'We look for clarity and purity,' Long says, and uses the rather lovely image of the ringing of a bell: 'You get that brilliantly clear clear sound.' And as with a bell, you know instinctively if there's the tiniest flaw in the metal – a false note introduced in the clarity. There are none of those. Take the 2007, and early-ripening, low-sugar year, 74% Cabernet Sauvignon. At first you wonder where you're going as your palate deals with the structure – the girders, the insistent tannins and bold acidity – and then you catch glimpses of fruit

through that structure, and then you realise where you are, and can see the life ahead for the wine.

Structure, elegance and purity of fruit characterise the wines. There is considerable vintage variation both in fruit character and tannic and acidic levels, as well as grape proportions. Cabernet Sauvignon is always the majority of the blend, but it can be as low as 51% (11) and as high as 75% (10).

These are smart, modern (in terms of their structure), beautifully-made, serious wines, and they are astonishingly cheap, at less than £35 for later vintages. Wines of this quality, of this pedigree, from Bordeaux, or Napa, or, increasingly, Sonoma, or Tuscany, would be twice, three or four times the price.

Vilafonté is a work in progress. The vineyards are getting older and are becoming 'more balanced,' Long says, 'and we have become more expert. We have learnt how to work with the tannins, to refine the structure. We feel we are beginning to master this site.'

www.broadbent.com

From Rot. By Adam Lechmere; July, 2014



BROADBENT

◆ SELECTIONS ◆

THE WINES

Available from Fells, Coe Vintners,
theDrinkShop.com, Sawinesonline.co.uk and
extensively in the United States.
From £35 bottle

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2003

82% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Merlot, 7% Cabernet Franc, 2% Malbec

Rich savoury nose, exotic spice and perfume, cassis. Lovely sour damson and sloe palate – rich acidity and soft tannins. Very juicy length, elegant goes on and on stimulating the palate. Sensational finish – 5 minutes and after that still flashbacks. ‘This exemplifies the potential and future of the vineyard’ (Long)

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2004

52% Cabernet Sauvignon, 35% Merlot, 9% Cabernet Franc, 4% Malbec

Reeper, rounder nose with the same rich spice as 03, and some delicate hay notes. Sour damson and sloe also some very high notes of balsamic raspberry. Very fine tannin, less concentration at end than 03 but soft and very charming

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2005

66% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot, 6% Cabernet Franc, 6% Malbec

Dense, tannins grip on the attack rather than develop in mid palate. Structure very evident here – not a hint of roundness but precision, austerity, sour salted dried plum flavours. Tightly-wound and rigid, powerful sour length giving little juice. Bordeaux-like, St Estephe or Pauillac at their most ascetic

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2006

54% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Merlot, 6% Cabernet Franc

Delicate ‘old armoire’ nose. Very pure, cassis, damson, sour plum, sloe. Grainy very textured, tactile tannins giving great gouts of oak-infused tobacco-flavoured juice. Intense and young. ‘It has its own kind of grace’ (Long)

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2007

74% Cabernet Sauvignon, 11% Merlot, 9% Cabernet Franc, 6% Malbec

Tannins hit instantly and form a scaffold through which glimpses of austere fruit can be seen. Intense, wild, giving little away, juice at end. Very concentrated, leave for at least three years for tannins to work some suppleness. Great concentrated juicy length with hints of sweetness to come. Classy

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2008

66% Cabernet Sauvignon, 28% Merlot, 6% Malbec

Lovely savoury edge to nose that’s been missing in the last few vintages. Even the aromas have length and memory. Tannins after 15% of palate come in fighting, delicate juicy heft, powerful. Dark fruit, stewed damson, bitter lick of sloe. Length gentle but still insistent – much more feminine wine at the end

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2009

54% Cabernet Sauvignon, 27% Merlot, 11% Cabernet Franc, 8% Malbec

Round, more of an international approachable bent, save tannins which

nevertheless grip tight, but the fruit takes equal billing here – fine sandalwood box, violet, plum skin marinated, continuous juice from mid-palate

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2010

75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Franc, 5% Malbec

Hint of chlorine and salt on nose, tannins have robust sour edge, more lick of sloe and salted plum, then hay-juice and tobacco juice, leaving impression of soft old wood at end. ‘When I made the blend for this I thought it would be the finest Bordeaux blend I had ever made. I don’t think it’s there yet. It’s very tight and compact and unevolved.’ (Long)

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2011

51% Cabernet Sauvignon, 26% Merlot, 14% Cabernet Franc, 9% Malbec

Rich, rich nose, redolent of tar and muscovado sugar and marinated dark fruit. Intense concentration, more tar but tannins, smoke and nettley green leaf and juice kick in at same time, leading to a comprehensive symphony of taste. An eager puppy. Will be magnificent as tannins and juice find their place

VILAFONTÉ SERIES C 2012

(not yet released)

52% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Merlot, 22% Cabernet Franc, 7% Malbec

Wonderful complexity to the nose, salt and smoke, hints of balsamic, crushed raspberry leaf. Tannins soft at first then getting grip but never overwhelming. Juice released in sweet and sour spurts, tannins gripping and insistent to end.

www.broadbent.com

From Rot. By Adam Lechmere; July, 2014