

PeeBee's Wine Column

Tribute to Lady Blue - first lady of wine

I first met Norma Ratcliffe at one of those extravagant Sunday parties that Spatz Sperling threw in the early 80s. Spatz was about to launch the Delheim Grand Reserve taken from the newly-bought site of Delvera, adjacent to Warwick.

Warwick was owned by Stan Ratcliffe, a big wig in Mercedes and an exponent of Queen's

English. Norma's American accent suited her bubbly nature.

Along came the great 1984 vintage. Warrick, Delvera and Kanonkop are all in the Muldersvlei, famed for its great soils. Warwick's grapes used to go to Anton Rupert's Distillers. There was an over-supply of top cabernet.

Norma anxiously phoned Spatz as the grapes lay in a truck. Step one, step two, step three and with a bit of help from friends, the first Warwick was produced. Stan bought barrel upon barrel and Norma pioneered fermentation in barrels. Tannins were huge.

She was to popularise Cabernet Franc, and become 'The First Lady' member of the Cape Winemakers Guild. She identified strongly with Beyers Truter in launching the Pinotage Association.

I had a hand in naming her first Bordeaux blend. I suggested 'Lady Blue', but she went for 'Femme Bleue'. In time, she focussed on 'Trilogy', which incidentally has scored 93 in New York's Decanter magazine two decades later.

The Lady Blue rolled up her sleeves in her cellar, but as the scale increased, she employed Lola Hunting (at the time one of the few young lady winemakers), Markus Milner, André van Rensburg, Annemarie Mostert and until recently the talented Louis Nel.

The latest news from the esta-



TOAST MATERIAL: Norma Ratcliffe was the first female member of the Cape Winemaker's Guild and launched the Pinotage Association with Beyers Truter

te is that Norma has moved to the suburban life of Cape Town - leaving one huge lasting legacy. Her son, Michael, stands back for nobody. He has reduced the number of labels and trebled sales.

Michael formed a partnership with Phil Freese and Zelma Long of Davis University, who were responsible for creating Robert Mondart's icon, Opus One. Phil is the world's leading soil expert and has rendered service internationally - besides reconstructing Zandvliet and Hamilton Russell.

They bought a site between Stellenbosch and Paarl with Vilafonte soils. From this the Vilafonte C (cabernet sauvignon-led blend) and Vilafonte M (merlot-led blend) have resulted.

Michael took Trilogy and the Vilafonte on a launch and intro-

duction to panels in the United States, tasting the best with the best. The 93-point recognition said a lot.

I recently tasted and purchased a paltry few. The M will always be a bit more comfortable in the mouth. In fact, Andrew Baker of Wineworx offered it in Knysna. Its structure stood out. The trade guys who were tasting were quite jaded after 15 wines, but when they heard the price, they downed the remaining morsels.

It was the C that captivated me. It is a wine for 15 to 20 years - extremely classic. I did not want to be influenced by the hype, but had to think of John Keats who wrote a poem to honour a moment when a quantum leap took place: 'On first looking into Chapman's Homer'.

I was taken a quantum leap forward.

To honour Lady Blue, Warwick - which is really marketing itself in a big way - has launched a second level accessible cabernet-based blend, with a blue label and neck, called 'The First Lady'.

Norma will always remain Lady Blue. She came into wine-making by coincidence. She set standards. She set out to be different. She fought the fight and deserves some recognition in our rapidly moving world.

A toast to Lady Blue.

PeeBee lives in George, teaches at Oakhill in Knysna, and explores wines worldwide.