

Meerlust Celebrates 40th Anniversary Of Its World-Renowned Wine Label

The first decade: 1975-1985

After inheriting Meerlust as a slightly dilapidated, mixed-farming property in 1959, Nico and an inspirational Jean had embarked on the long, laborious restoration of the historic Cape Dutch homestead (eventually safeguarded as a National Monument in 1987). At the same time, Nico committed to wine farming, converting wheat fields to vineyard, buying adjoining land and planting the farm's first red varieties.

His forebears had cultivated and vinified mainly *steen* (chenin blanc) and *groendruif* (semillon); he planted cabernet sauvignon and pinot noir, followed by merlot and cabernet franc. A 1967 holiday in France had highlighted climatic and geological similarities between Bordeaux and the Eerste River Valley, with its proximity to the False Bay coast and soils of decomposed granite mixed. It was what had sparked his intent to make a Bordeaux-style red blend, in spite of the local belief then that blends were inferior to single-varietal wines.

While awaiting the maturity of his newly planted vines, Nico continued to deliver grapes from his 200ha to various co-operative cellars and work at his winemaking. In 1975 he felt ready to introduce his first red, a cabernet sauvignon. Young samples won gold at the Stellenbosch Regional Wine Show and the trophy for overall champion red at the South African Championship Wine Show. After a further two years in French oak casks, Meerlust Cabernet Sauvignon 1975 was launched in 1978, earning the then-vaunted industry stamp of approval ensuring commercial success: a Wine and Spirit Board Wine of Origin Superior gold 'bus ticket' sticker.

Experimental bottlings of a Merlot and a Cabernet Franc were also winning show accolades, piquing the interest of Italian oenologist Giorgio dalla Cia, then part of The Bergkelder team who managed several privately-owned estates' wine maturation, storage, bottling and distribution.

In 1978, Giorgio joined Nico at Meerlust in which was to be a dynamic, fruitful decade-long friendship and partnership between owner-vintner and cellar master.

At this stage, Meerlust's winemaking facilities, including the early 18th-century cellar, were being restored, upgraded and expanded. Two new small cellars were built, carefully designed and placed to fit in with existing historic structures, including a sheep *kraal*, cattle *kraal* and wagon house, sensitively altered to accommodate barrel maturation and storage.

After a couple of years' experimentation, the exceptional quality of all three Bordeaux varieties from the 1980 vintage persuaded the duo to compile the blend that, after some years of monitored barrel maturation, was finally released in 1984: Meerlust Rubicon 1980. It was one of only three such

blends made in South Africa at that time (Overgaauw and Welgemeend were the other two pioneers).

That same illustrious vintage also delivered the first bottling of another wine that was to endure under the Meerlust label: Meerlust Pinot Noir 1980. It was the year that Meerlust dominated the SA Championship Wine Show: Cabernet Sauvignon (champion red wine), Cabernet Franc (champion new variety), Giorgio dalla Cia (champion winemaker) and Nico Myburgh (champion private wine producer).

Despite the Rubicon drawing on the estate's cabernet as the foundation of its blend, bottlings of Meerlust Cabernet Sauvignon continued throughout the '70s and '80s. Except in 1977, 1979 and 1985 when, applying rigorous self-imposed quality control, Meerlust opted not to release. It has remained standard procedure with all its wines.

The second decade: 1985-1995

The beginning of the decade saw the end of an era with the illness and untimely death in 1988 of Nico aged just 64. But it was to herald the second renaissance of Meerlust under guidance of widely travelled Francophile son Hannes, aged 31, mentored by his father and ably supported by Giorgio, who was to remain cellar master throughout this period and beyond.

Besides extensive renovations and refurbishing of the main house (completed in 1991), major investment in new French oak barrels was made (replacing the farm's 2 500-litre vats). Early forays by Nico into chardonnay came to fruition when, after successful experiments with trial plots in the late '80s, a five-hectare vineyard was set aside and the maiden Meerlust Chardonnay 1995 was vinified for release in 1996. A further 10ha were planted in 1991.

As the quantity of wine produced increased, the two parallel cellars were enlarged: first by covering the courtyard between them in 1989 and, in 1992, extending the frontages. A reshuffling of equipment and installation of temperature control saw the various cellar spaces dedicated to specific wine styles.

Nico and Giorgio had first exhibited the rare courage and commitment to the highest standards of wine quality in 1985, when deciding not to bottle a Rubicon, labelling it as a Meerlust Red instead. This stringent self-control was again exercised with the 1990 vintage.

Eventually, as Meerlust Rubicon began to conquer the world wine scene from the early 1990s, it was decided to reserve all the estate's quality cabernet, which included new plantings, for the growing flagship blend.

Hence the 1993 vintage of Meerlust Cabernet Sauvignon was to be the last...until deep into the next decade. Meerlust was (as it still is) honouring the tradition of the original South African 'estate' concept formulated in the early 1970s by confining its vaunted label to wines grown and made on the farm.

The third decade: 1995-2005

A time of experimentation was marked by some wine style changes and new ventures. Experiments with the Meerlust Pinot Noir resulted in a move away from delicate dryness to a richer, more fruit-full version given new oak treatment from the 1995 vintage.

In 1997 Giorgio introduced the first local estate 'grappa' (a personal venture accommodated in Meerlust's historic old barn, transformed in 1995 into a small, state-of-the-art distillery for grape husk brandy).

Meerlust Cabernet Sauvignon made a brief return in 2004 and 2005, when small amounts were sequestered once more for bottling as a single varietal expression of Meerlust's essential cachet as a grower of classical cabernet, before the in-demand Rubicon again began to lay claim to all the farm's Cabernet. Except in 2002, when vintage quality was not deemed sufficiently high for a Rubicon blend, and the Meerlust Red label was called to duty.

This decade was also marked by the arrival of a winemaking assistant for Giorgio: young UCT law and Elsenburg wine and viticulture graduate Chris Williams, who spent six vintages in the Meerlust cellar from 1995 to 2000.

When Giorgio bade farewell to Meerlust in 2004 after 26 years as cellar master, Chris was ready to return, his intimate knowledge of the farm now enriched by outside experience. His commitment was to retaining the classic core of Meerlust's wines, while seeking new ways of expressing their site identity.

Inspiration came from a recently completed vineyard replanting programme, with 110ha of optimally established vines delivering grapes with greater fruit intensity, bolstered by correct crop yields, picking at optimum ripeness and careful fruit selection. Rejuvenation lay in youthful open-mindedness to explore a myriad of 'new' winemaking techniques based on traditional methods, including minimal handling and more time spent on blending small, separately vinified batches of wine.

During this period, Hannes' increasing travels abroad to personally introduce Meerlust wines to a growing global market were complemented by incorporating public tastings on the farm (previously by appointment only) into the normal working weekday and Saturday sales hours.

The fourth decade: 2005-2015

The fourth decade of the Meerlust label has seen it entrenched, both locally and internationally, as emblematic of an enduring yet modern South African wine classic. Rubicon led the way, awards and accolades reflecting the seamless transition between cellar masters, indicative of the property's inherent greatness.

In 2005 Meerlust Rubicon was voted 'SA's Most Prestigious Wine Internationally' and 'An SA Icon' by readers of the former *Wine* (SA) magazine.

In 2006 the 2001 won the Chateau Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande trophy for best blended red at the 2006 International Wine & Spirits Competition in London. It was also twice voted as one of the Top 100 Wines in the world by American publication *Wine Enthusiast*: vintage 2001 in 2006 and vintage 2007 in 2012, the latter awarded a five-star rating in that year's *Platter's SA Wine Guide*.

In 2013, vintage 2009 was rated Best New World Red by the UK's *Decanter* magazine (an accolade previously earned in 2004 by vintage 1999). Fitting then that it was the first Rubicon vintage to carry the motto '*Alea iacta est*' (the die is cast) on the capsule. Attributed to Roman army commander Julius Caesar when committing his troops to crossing the Rubicon River to conquer Rome in 49BC, the phrase describes the courageous gamble Nico Myburgh took in bottling a red blend under the Meerlust label in the 1980s when blends were considered second-rate in the South African wine industry.

Meerlust saw the first release in 2008 of wines under the current team of owner Hannes, cellar master Chris and viticulturist Roelie: the Meerlust Rubicon 2004, Meerlust Merlot 2004 and Meerlust Pinot Noir 2004.

Then, in 2011, came the re-introduction as a permanent part of the Meerlust portfolio of the wine that started it all: Meerlust Cabernet Sauvignon. The 2009 vintage followed nearly two decades of intermittent bottlings (the last in 1993, followed by a 2004 and 2005) as the star-studded Rubicon drew on all Meerlust's best reserves, before new plantings of cabernet were able to guarantee a steady, albeit small supply for a single-varietal wine from the grape with which Meerlust has had an enduring bond.

The year 2012 saw evidence of yet another subtle change to Meerlust's flagship: Meerlust Rubicon 2008 was enriched by a dash of one of the traditional Bordeaux blend ingredients, petit verdot, carefully nurtured and experimented with since being planted over a decade before.

Yet, amid all the clamour and demand for this sought-after label, Meerlust has remained true to its long-held tenet of not compromising on quality. No Rubicon was bottled in 2011 (the Meerlust Dry Red label was again applied), while in 2014 no Meerlust Pinot Noir was released. To end off the fourth decade the Rubicon 2010 was awarded a five-star rating in *Platter's SA Wine Guide*.

Four decades after the Meerlust label was introduced to the wine world, its reputation remains a source of pride and is testament to the enduring integrity of the Meerlust team.