

When Art MEETS SCIENCE

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Some seven and a half years ago, Wendy and Hylton Appelbaum took over the DeMorgenzon wine estate, transforming it into one of the country's finest. CLASSICFEEL's Lore Watterson spoke to the couple about the transition from Joburg life, the business of wine farming, and the interesting effects of baroque music on vines.

It took Wendy and Hylton Appelbaum five years to find the right wine estate; this was DeMorgenzon or the 'the morning sun', so named as it is the first farm in Stellenbosch to receive the sun each day. Having bought the farm in 2003, the Appelbaums set about transforming it, beginning by removing most of the established vines, with the exception of some fifteen hectares of old vine Chenin Blanc. Their maiden vintage, crafted by Teddy Hall – whom they credit with being 'pivotal in changing the nature of Chenin Blanc as it is drunk today' – was the first of any maiden vintage in the country to earn five stars, a very promising beginning.

'People say it is luck,' says Wendy, 'it certainly is lucky; any entrepreneur will tell you that there's luck involved in their path to success. But we did give it the very best wood, the very best winemaker, the very best care of the grapes etc. So it goes back to that old story of Gary Player: "the harder I practise, the luckier I get."'

Having removed most of the vines, the Appelbaums set about replanting, following the advice of the industry's leading

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experts as to all the viticultural details: matching cultivars to soils, careful consideration of weather patterns, analyses of temperatures and so on. DeMorgenzon benefits from both its high altitude and its south-facing vineyards, which also face the sea. All these factors combine to give the wine estate, 'the coolest vineyards in Stellenbosch,' Wendy explains. All of these factors play a crucial role in producing the quality of grapes essential to a good wine. 'At the end of the day, wine is made in the vineyard, and the reason that I say that, is that you can make bad wine out of good grapes, but you cannot make good wine out of bad grapes,' explains Wendy.

All these factors were carefully considered before the couple committed themselves to buying DeMorgenzon, testament to Wendy's considerable business acumen. Wine farming, she points out, is a business – whatever the beautiful, tranquil surroundings might lead one to believe – and so the transition from being a Johannesburg-based high-profile business woman to managing the DeMorgenzon industry was not a problem.

And DeMorgenzon is a *big* business. The wine estate produces some 50 000 cases a year, which must then be marketed and sold.

Wendy Appelbaum, high-profile business woman turned wine estate owner



The courtyard at DeMorgenzon reflects the Appelbaums' passion for flowers and plants



DeMorgenzon's south-facing slopes receive the first sunlight of the day in Stellenbosch



Much of the estate's output is exported to the United States and England, as well as Sweden, Holland, Germany, Belgium, Denmark and France. 'It all boils down to really delivering great value for price,' says Wendy of surviving a competitive industry. 'We strive – and I think we succeed – on attention to detail and quality. Anything that does not cut it does not get bottled under our labels.' This attention to detail is something that comes naturally to Wendy, combined with a high level of energy it produces these award-winning DeMorgenzon wines.

While the Appelbaum's approach to choosing wines to drink is straightforward and requires no specialist knowledge on the part of the consumer ('You should like what's in your mouth,' says Wendy. 'It's simple.') – their approach to winemaking is quite the opposite. 'In order to deliver the dream, you have to surround yourself with serious professionals,' she says. 'Carl van der Merwe, who is our winemaker now, is the most meticulous man and he is incredibly talented.'

They expand on this, comparing a winemaker to a musician: 'It's an incredibly apt comparison, because there is that very sound and thorough technical knowledge that you have to have – you cannot step forth onto the podium and *decide* that you're going to conduct like von Karajan. You can't do that out of passion – you have got to have incredibly skilled knowledge – deep and fundamental knowledge. And then, the thing that differentiates you from a whole host of people with that knowledge... what elevates you is having all of the technical knowledge, plus the flair of genius. And that flair of genius is artistry.'

'Making wine is a combination of science and art,' according to Wendy.

Music plays a critical role at DeMorgenzon, where many of the vines are exposed to baroque music on a fulltime basis. Whether this is good wine sense, or sheer whimsy, time and further research will tell, but Hylton Appelbaum at least believes that it produces result.

'My thinking is that it's not a question of the vines sitting in the soil enjoying music; vines are not sentient creatures, they have no way of enjoying or not enjoying,' he explains.

'It's more a question of physics than a question of music, agriculture or viticulture. It is the perfection of the wave. Obviously the mathematical exactness of the baroque music – Bach being the prime exponent – was what got me thinking. I also read quite a lot about the positive effects of speaking to your plants and playing music to them. I've never been aware of anybody playing music to their plants in a systemic way, or playing classical music to vines. There has been work done with different plants... [including] work that has been published in an Asian journal of plant science, measuring the growth of onion roots, which they did in a completely controlled environment. [This study suggested that] the effect that music had on the growth of onions was extraordinary; it was the roots that counted. That really got me thinking. Classical music had the most profound impact on the root growth... Now what is really important with the growth of a vine is its roots – how deep they go, how many nutrients they can get and what moisture they can find – because you do not want to water vines. Watering vines will wind up giving you a big, fat juicy berry and a lazy plant – that's exactly what you don't want. You want vigorous deep-rooted plants.'

Hylton has put this into effect at DeMorgenzon and carefully monitored it over the last two years. In a comparison between two 'blocks' of vineyard, in which the slope, soil, root stock and so on, were all the same, except that one block was exposed to music, while the other was not, the vines exposed to music appeared to bud more slowly and evenly, and produce grapes with phenolic ripeness and slightly lower sugars, 'Which is exactly what you want,' he explains. 'You want fruitiness, you want flavour, but you don't want huge sugars in overripe grapes, because what you get then is huge alcohol. So what we strive for – which funnily enough, the music helps deliver – is more fruit with less alcohol.'

While the Appelbaums did not always intend to make the farm their primary residence, life on the estate seems to have won them over, making it harder and harder for them to return to Johannesburg. So they too have put down roots, and built their new home where the sun first hits the Stellenbosch mountains. **CF**