

WINE  
TALK

# Giving Back

*Jacqui Latimer is captured by Michael Back's passion for not simply making wine but also taking care of the environment*

Ever since I heard that the Backsberg Estate near Paarl had been certified carbon neutral, I wanted to know more. On a late winter's afternoon, I turn off the Klappmuts Road and drive down a tree-lined avenue carpeted with daisies to chat to Michael Back and winemaker Alicia Rechner.

With a head of untamed hair and a wild beard, Michael Back reminds me of a latter day Old Testament prophet. His zeal for making a positive difference certainly reinforces the image. But it's the way he talks about his estate that shows he's an astute businessman with his feet firmly on the ground as much a starry-eyed dreamer. It's a charming combination.

We sit in the sun at one of the wrought-iron tables on the veranda of the estate's tasting room. Michael points to a huge chandelier inside. "Those are all energy-saving bulbs," he says. "We save R20 000 a year using them throughout the estate. Where we

save money, we plough it back into the environment. We're using the light-bulb saving as collateral for a loan to finance solar energy panels. Everything we do here is influenced by a desire to be environmentally responsible."

He explains that Backsberg has been certified

farm production and transportation. Even the fuel consumption of planes used for product transportation was calculated and included in the estate's carbon footprint.

The next step was to 'offset' or sequester the impact of the emissions by planting the trees needed to absorb

the CO<sub>2</sub>. The estate worked on this with national NGO Food and Trees for Africa. Eighteen months after setting out to become a Carbon Neutral estate, Backsberg was certified.

"This is not a commercial gimmick to capture the public's imagination," Michael assures me. "We face serious environmental challenges; challenges we should all be addressing. As

a landowner you have a unique perspective and responsibility. Caring for the environment has always been a personal passion. Employing a full time horticultural expert at Backsberg for the past 10 years has had a lot to do with our desire to be environmentally sensitive."



*Astute businessman or starry-eyed dreamer?  
Michael Back is a little bit of both*



carbon neutral since 2006. To earn this status, the impact of the estate's various activities on the environment had to be understood and quantified in terms of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions. A carbon technician completed the audit, which included measuring CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from all



Michael believes it's important to go beyond tree planting to offset CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. For Backsberg staff, it's second nature to try to find creative ways of saving energy and investing in the environment at every level of the business.

"We use ozone water (see box) for sterilisation and have created water banks to

store water which we draw off at peak times," Michael says. "We're planting a wood lot, a forest specifically planted to be cut down for fuel; and with a view to using methane as an alternative source of energy, we will be building a methane digester in the coming months. We even buy smaller tractors these days."

Michael is even branching into furniture in a bid to reuse instead of discard old barrels. A local carpenter has set up a workshop on the farm to transform them into lifestyle pieces. "The wine industry saws down oaks in Europe and converts them into barrels for a usage of between five and eight years," Michael explains, "then they're cut in half and used as flower pots or other forms of decoration and usually rot away within a few years. The carbon storage capacity of the tree

is reduced to 10 to 12 years after being sawn down. In our furniture business we should be able to extend the carbon storage capacity of the wood by at least 50 to 75 years."

Backsberg is currently the only Carbon Neutral-certified estate in South Africa. Would Michael be keen to spread the message of carbon neutrality to his fellow landowners? "I am not getting up on a soapbox, but would be happy for anyone to come and ask me questions and see what we are doing here and take away whatever they learn."

*'We face serious environmental challenges. As a landowner you have a unique perspective and responsibility'*

This attitude of getting on with the job at hand and not making a big

fuss resonates with winemaker Alicia Rechner, who also shares Michael's passion for the environment. She's no-nonsense and down to earth and I like her immediately. "I'm super-environmentally concerned and very health conscious," she tells me. "I have a vegetable garden at home and bake my own bread." She goes on to explain how her winemaking is influenced by the estate's environmentally conscious philosophy. "I add as little as possible to the wines," she says. "I hate to add anything. Each year, I look at the possibilities of the grapes and decide how they can best be used. A few years ago we had a malfunctioning irrigation system in one of our vineyard blocks. The grapes had turned into raisins, so I used them to make port. I never try to make the wines exactly the same each year."

Alicia also believes it is important to stay as hands-on in your winemaking as possible. She prefers to spend most of her time in the winery, and her wines seem to respond to this approach. The estate's wine offering is divided into ranges, with the varietal-based Backsberg range introducing you to the flavours of Backsberg; and the Black Label and Babylons Toren Reserve range making sure you become intimately acquainted with the best the estate has to offer. The niche range of organic and kosher wines ensures that there really is wine to be enjoyed.

As I gather my things, Alicia hurries off and returns cradling a bottle of Babylons Toren Red. "Here's my *rootjie*," she says, handing it to me. I'm delighted—not only by my gift, but by this estate where wine is made with love and in good conscience. **GT**

## Ozone in Water

Ozone (O<sub>3</sub>), which provides a protective screen against dangerous solar radiation, is formed whenever lightning occurs, or when an electrical discharge creates a spark. Ozone can be made by drawing air through a generator and charging it with a high voltage. The high voltage splits some oxygen molecules into oxygen atoms. Some of these atoms react with oxygen molecules to form ozone: (O<sub>1</sub> + O<sub>2</sub> = O<sub>3</sub>). Ozone is second only to fluorine as a powerful oxidant. Like chlorine, it can inactivate organisms. It also functions as a micro-flocculating agent to 'polish' the water and improve clarity.