

WINE
TALK

Bubble Head

Jacqui Latimer sips stars with Mr Bubbles, talks Cap Classique with the Colmants and meets a maestro at Ambeloui

“Hold on, I want to show you something.” Pieter Ferreira suddenly jumps up and disappears. Before vanishing into the inner sanctum of the tasting facility, the award-winning **GRAHAM BECK** cellarmaster has been telling me about the country’s growing thirst for champagne and Cap Classique.

The man fondly known as ‘South Africa’s Mr Bubbles’ returns carrying a heavy bottle, unlabelled but for a narrow white sticker with the word ‘Clive’ scrawled on it. “This,” says Pieter, “is something special.” He pours and we drink. Special doesn’t do ‘Clive’ justice. A 2003 Vintage Cap Classique Cuvée, Clive is the farm’s first Prestige Cuvée and a hymn to what a good bubbly should be. Delicate bubbles. Lees-y, buttery richness. And hints of spicy citrus.

A Clive-induced reverie is interrupted as Pieter hands me a glass of his 2004 Brut Blanc de Blanc, with whiffs of lime and a creamy complexity. We work our way through the rest of the range, which includes a golden-pink Brut Rosé, shamelessly seductive with rakish raspberry riffs and sherbet on the palate. I am not surprised when Pieter tells me exports of our local bubbly are growing steadily each year, as is local consumption.

“Over the last few years, bubbly has definitely shifted from an occasion wine to a lifestyle drink,” says Pieter, who insists you need no excuse to open a

bottle of bubbly. “As the variety of local and imported sparklers available in the country has increased, awareness of the product has improved. Consumers are being educated about the difference between cheap and cheerful carbonated sparkling wine and bottle-fermented champagne and Cap Classique.”



Nick Christodoulou, of Ambeloui Cap Classique, produces 7 000 bottles a year from his farm in Hout Bay

The **CAP CLASSIQUE PRODUCERS’ ASSOCIATION**, formed in 1992, has played a major role in educating the public about bubbly, specifically the local Cap Classique wines made according to the traditional *Méthode Champenoise*.

Although South African winemakers mirror the methods used in champagne, wine made outside the French region cannot be called champagne. “As the association, we came up with the name *Méthode Cap*

Classique (MCC) or Cap Classique (Cape Classic) for our local bottle-fermented sparkling wine,” says Pieter.

Producers in South Africa making MCC usually use the traditional champagne varieties of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier, because, as Pieter points out, these varieties are perfectly suited for secondary fermentation. “There are two schools of thought,” he says.

“The traditionalists who don’t want to reinvent the wheel, and those who want to try something different and get some funky stuff.” Unconventional local offerings include **MÔRESON’S BRUT ROSÉ**, made from 100 per cent Pinotage, and **NITIDA’S SHIRAZ CAP CLASSIQUE 2006**.

Restaurants offering MCC by the glass and events like the **FRANSCHHOEK CHAMPAGNE AND CAP CLASSIQUE FESTIVAL**, to be held this year from 6–7 December, have all contributed to a steady increase in demand. “We’ve seen a market growth of about 12 per cent a year for our MCCs,” says Pieter, who admits to being a bubbly evangelist.

“I have these old *tannies* coming to the tasting room and telling me they won’t try the bubbly because sparkling wine gives them a headache. It’s nonsense. I ask them when last they drank sparkling wine and they invariably say at *niggie* so-and-so’s wedding. That’s when I point out that they probably had a G&T or three over snacks while waiting

in the sun for photos, a glass or two of wine over dinner, a few sips of bubbly for the toasts, and finished off the evening with a brandy or liqueur. That combo would give anyone a headache!”

My head still feels great as I make my way down the valley to visit JP and Isabelle Colmant at **COLMANT CAP CLASSIQUE AND CHAMPAGNE**. Colmant is South Africa’s first commercial winery solely dedicated to producing high quality Cap Classique. It was born when JP, Isabelle and their five children moved to South Africa from Belgium in 2002 after falling in love with the Franschhoek Valley.

“Isabelle and I have always been passionate about champagne,” explains JP. “In Belgium, we lived two hours from Champagne and often used to drive around exploring the area and the little family-owned cellars. Opening our own cellar was just a dream, that is, until we visited the Cape and discovered this valley.”

“We came here for the lifestyle and to make great wine,” says JP simply. “We believe in staying small and focused, and never intend to produce more than 40 000 bottles a year—the average production of a French champagne house. Keeping to this capacity allows us to have full control of the whole process.”

Besides producing their own Colmant Cap Classique—the inaugural vintage of their Brut Tradition and Brut Rosé was released in September 2008—JP and Isabelle also import French champagne from boutique cellars. “There are two camps when it comes to champagne,” says JP. “You have luxury-

goods companies producing champagne on a large scale and exporting heavily-marketed brands like **MOËT ET CHANDON AND VEUVE CLICQUOT**, and then there are the small producers who can’t afford to export or spend a lot on marketing.

“Of the approximately 4 000 champagne houses in France, most are small producers relying on a committed local clientele,” explains JP. “We’ve gone in search of excellent independent producers and we import their products ourselves—cutting out the middle man and keeping costs down.”

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JP and Isabelle have been importing champagne since 2005 and stock **FOLLET-RAMILLON, TRIBAUT AND MAILLY GRAND CRU**, all available from their tasting room and online from their website. We want to introduce a new market to champagne,” says JP. “We offer discerning customers quality French champagne, without the hype, and at competitive prices.”

Another wine farm producing its own Cap Classique, but also importing champagne, is **FRANSCHHOEK PASS WINERY**. The farm offers tours for groups of 4–24 people, which include experiencing champagne production methods such as riddling and degorging bottles in the cellar, and a tasting of their **MORENA CAP CLASSIQUE, THIERRY LESNE AND BEAUFORT ET FILS** champagnes.

A bubbly experience of a slightly different kind takes place once a year in Hout Bay. On the first Saturday in November, Nick Christodoulou throws open the gates of his Hout Bay home to dedicated fans of his **AMBELOUI CAP CLASSIQUE**. “About 7 000 bottles are available each year for sale and I’m normally sold out within a few hours,” says Nick, who describes himself as a semi-retired financier, winemaker, model train enthusiast, sailor and family man. The lovingly-made boutique Cap Classiques are made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes grown on his and a neighbouring Hout Bay property and named after his children and grandchildren.

Nick insists there’s no substitute for delivering quality and value for money and his handcrafted wines, which have scored four *Platter* stars and above, sell for around R100. “I have Porsches and Ferraris parked outside on sale day, but if you think you can rip off rich people, you’re wrong. They didn’t get rich by squandering their money. You have to give them quality and value.”

With a renewed appreciation for sipping ‘stars’, I’d better get out the chamois and polish. It seems my little Honda Jazz will be hobnobbing with the big boys and girls in Hout Bay while I’m queuing for a few bottles of Rosanne Rosé. **GT**

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