



# CELEBRATING A SILVER ANNIVERSARY

Juliet Cullinan, the founder of the Juliet Cullinan Standard Bank Wine Festival, which celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in May, talks about her passion for wine as well as the evolution of the festival that had humble beginnings to what is now among the country's most prestigious wine events.

The corner stones of my life are peppered with memories of my first Sauternes, Meursault, Lanzerac Pinotage, my first mouthful of black forest cake, even brains on toast. At two years old I held my first empty Magnum of Bollinger and at four years old I arranged a table and party food for my dolls. In short my life has always been about entertaining, promoting and tasting fabulous wines.

It was my father, Neil Cullinan, who first taught me to taste wine and how to identify the different varietal elements of taste, colour, bouquet and viscosity. But it was my grandfather, Ronald Osborn who

from a very young age, took me travelling, whether it was to the shores of Natal or slopes of Switzerland who made a huge impression on me. He told me "that he didn't care if I failed in life, but he did care if I didn't try". If experiences shape one, these two men fired my passion and stoked it to follow my dreams, and never settle for anything less.

When I was in my early twenties, while I was holidaying in Hermanus, I invited a few winemakers to present their flagship wine at a private wine tasting. Peter Finlayson from Bouchard Finlayson, Tim Hamilton Russell, a pioneer in the Walker

Bay area, Gyles Webb from Thelema and Jeff Grier from Villiera graced my event with their wonderful wines. I'd laid out one long tasting table to seat 40 short-and-T-shirt-clad guests who appeared to be spellbound, as they were introduced to the nuances and unique features of the wines. In common with best international practice, I had laid on tasting sheets so the guests could rate the wines, and laid out the rows of glasses of wine for them to taste.

Shortly after the success of the event, I decided to host the tasting in Johannesburg for a bigger market. I bounced the idea off my friend and mentor, the late Peter Devereaux who asked me what I would call the event. I said, "I had not thought of that yet." He said, "you have to call it the *Juliet Cullinan Wine Festival*." When he died the following week, I honoured him by using my own name. The "festival" was more like a little tasting featuring around 30 producers who rolled up from the Cape to present their wines. Travel was not what it is now and this was one of the few trips they made annually. The ballroom and conference rooms at the Inanda Club

with its long curtains and lined with horse and hunting prints was the backdrop for this first festival.

I remember standing at the reception welcoming wine lovers, offering them a glass and introducing them to the new wines around the room. It was fun seeing everyone excited and learning to taste and interact. The extremely agile, great, late Ross Gower did flick-flacks down the centre aisle between the wines and to add interest, the wine makers would swop tables and promote their competitors wines while they joked and had fun with guests. It was a long, tiring evening and when we were packing up, Webb, Gower and Jooste called for a beer. That event proved to be the first of many.

Each year we dashed around emptying ice buckets and ice which was the one commodity that caused the most commotion. There is never enough. Early birds took most of it, forgetting that their wines would chill faster when they added water to it. There were years when the sponsored Béne water chilled the ice, which taught us to make sure that we

only handed out the mineral water when tables were already set up. Glasses were our barometer to count the number of people in the room. Some years wine reps would collect glasses, smuggle them out and give them to their friends to come in. So we started giving out branded glasses and guests walked out with as many as they could balance between their fingers. Last year we moved to large glasses, which allows the wine to open up in flavour.

Over the years the festival has remained fun. There is always an excitement when people meet the face behind the label, discuss vintages, maturation and how the wines develop in the bottle. The Juliet Cullinan Standard Bank Wine Festival is known for having knowledgeable wine tasters who ask interesting questions and are able to compare local and international styles.

As the festival grew, I searched and tried out different venues. The Johannesburg Country Club followed by The Wanderers Club, which became a favourite for several years as they could manage the growth in the number of exhibitors. There was





a break from the Wanderers after the fire that ravished its old timbers and a move to the new exciting layout at Dimension Data where wine mingled with large artworks. We moved back to the Wanderers before moving to the exclusive Summer Place with its beautiful classical architecture. 25 years on, we return to Inanda Club, to the stylishly renovated cricket pavilion overlooking the Inanda Club polo field.

Winemakers' attire has changed from the days when Boland Coetzee would wear shorts and no shoes, or winemakers would squeeze rugby physiques into old Matric Dance suits. Today's cellarmasters eagerly come dressed for success and Ken Forrester is bound to sport his bright bow tie. The festival was always in winter and the reception froze with welcomingly open doors. There were years that I hosted

separate white and red wine shows, the Elgin Valley and the Constantia Big Five show. Today there are so many festivals that we keep our winter slot between the local harvest from January to April, the international UK and European shows and the Old World harvest.

The festival has always been an elegantly formal affair, with my aim being to teach guests about the tradition of wine. "No perfume or aftershave" is added to invitations so there can be no conflicting aromas. I have encouraged spitting and have not been offended when I have heard "ag sis tog" when I spat.

Another innovation was arranging "Toot and Scoot" transport as well as alcohol testing kits at the exit. We brought winemaking to Johannesburg, last year

when winemakers brought along a slide show of their vineyards, cellar and harvest on laptops. They also brought soil samples, which ranged in size from huge bolders to tiny pebbles. These were displayed in glass dishes, which some guests mistook for chocolate chips!

In the earlier days Mastrantonio offered a pasta bar with varied sauces, and then for years guests huddled around the generously sponsored Pick 'n Pay food display. This year guests will have the added pleasure of being able to buy stylish food platters from Karen Short of By Word of Mouth.

My children were always so eager to get involved. At 3 years old, my daughter said my name was "Juliet Cullinan Wine Festival". I recall her at 6 selling the entry

tickets and welcoming guests with a "do have a good tasting". My son would discuss Chardonnay, he loved comparing styles and enjoyed lees contact and malolactic fermentation. On one occasion the winery refused to serve him as he was underage. He replied indignantly, "but I always spit." They loved the publicity and the years that they featured in magazines and I loved having them share the event with me.

Fifteen years ago, the festival kicked into a new gear with the Standard Bank sponsorship. We were able to afford new decor, large mats lined the tables, and the advertising was increased. It is still discrete, appealing to our elite data base - wine lovers who enjoy food and travel. Makro have offered their excellent "Sip and Shop" service encouraging great sales

with their discounted show prices for the last eight years.

My pride in SA wines drove me to want to promote the finest. My love of food inspired me to open a cooking school to showcase leading chefs. I have a deep love for the vine and those who make these unique wines. I've written about them, promoted them and collected souvenirs from moments with them.

The Juliet Cullinan Standard Bank Wine Festival remains the oldest and most elite festival, showcasing the finest wines to aficionados and wine lovers. It is their enthusiasm to meet winemakers, compare grape varieties, terroirs and tastes that makes this event noteworthy. The small number of by-invitation-only wineries means every winery is

important. I am blessed to have had the support and encouragement of the wine fraternity. After years of running the event on my own, Olivia Fair now assists with the valuable co-ordination of all the different aspects of the festival. It is a huge amount of work but I still love the event, madly rushing around and then feeling quite bereft when it is over and the winemakers are leaving carrying wines, banners and brochures. A line from a Jackson Browne song seems to say it all: "Won't you stay-ay-ay a little bit longer"? I long to ask them to join me for a glass of wine. These cellar masters have become my friends and my *raison d'être*. I thank them for giving me such a deep love, respect and passion for this beautiful art. I thank them for bringing such meaning and joy to all those who attend the show.