

Pemla Makanda (wine steward at One&Only Cape Town)

AFTER completing an electrical engineering certificate at Port Elizabeth College, Pemla moved to Cape Town in 2007. And after working in administration for an estate agency (where they would often celebrate a sale with wine), she applied for a hostess job at One&Only Cape Town.

“Unfortunately, the job was already taken,” says the mother of two. “But they offered me a waitressing job on the spot, which I gladly accepted.”

In her first month on the job, she was voted the best waitress. And again in the next two months. Although the hotel wanted her to move to the front office, she was more comfortable in her role of pairing wine with food so that both could be served in the best way.

The hotel then offered her external wine training, facilitated by Wines of South Africa (Wosa) and sponsored by Glenelly, a Stellenbosch winery that sponsored further courses for her. As time passed, her love for wine grew.

“I love cabernet sauvignon,” she says. “But the more I taste wine, the more it keeps changing.”

Looking ahead, Pemla’s goal is to work in wine sales. Because she likes the variety of wines from different farms, she would like to “be out there talking about wines” and perhaps making sales as a rep.

“I didn’t know how beautiful wine was,” she says. “There are so many ways of enjoying.”

Phelisa Moni (wine adviser at Spice Route Winery)

After matriculating, Phelisa worked at one of Shoprite’s retail warehouses for about two years. Money was tight, so one of her colleagues suggested she apply to the Pinotage Youth Development Academy, which prepares young and previously disadvantaged South Africans for employment in the wine industry or in related hospitality and tourism sectors.

“I used to work on table grape farms during the school holidays as a teenager and once worked with grapevines for three weeks during harvest,” she says. “The application form took me back to those experiences. I was interested in learning more about the wine industry.”

Phelisa left her job to study at the academy, in Stellenbosch, for a year. “We learnt about sales, marketing, hospitality, wine-making, and wine tourism,” she says of the practical and technical skills she acquired during the course.

After working at KWF (winemaking), Spier (hospitality), Simonsig (sales and marketing) and Nootgedacht (vine production), Phelisa applied for an exchange programme facilitated by Elsenburg College. She was then accepted for a trip to France, which let her spend six weeks in Burgundy, two weeks at a French college, and time with a winery family at Domaine Dubois in Côte du Nuits. “It was lovely. I worked in the vineyards and winery during the French harvest. It was difficult to overcome the language, but I learnt more about the traditional way of winemaking by hand.”

Phelisa is working at the Spice Route Winery. Her job requires her to host tastings and explain the stories behind the wines.



Heinrich Kulsen



Phelisa Moni



Praisyl Dlamini



Pemla Makanda

Wining and shining

Four young South Africans are showcasing a new generation in the world of local wine, writes Eugene Yiga

“I deal with local and international guests,” she says. “The internationals are my favourite because they enjoy the sessions more, although they buy only three or four bottles.”

Teaching people about wine is only the start of Phelisa’s career plans. “I know how to market and sell

wine,” she says. “I still want to grow in this industry, not spend the rest of my life in the tasting room.”

Praisyl Dlamini (assistant winemaker at Zonnebloem)

Praisyl grew up in Empangeni and, in a pilot programme for top

schools in the area, was accepted to study on a Department of Agriculture bursary. She chose winemaking as her option, partly to challenge the belief that people in KwaZulu-Natal like *umqombothi* (Xhosa for maize beer) more than wine.

“I worked in the cellar during the last year,” she says of her

Bachelor of Agriculture (viticulture and oenology) studies at Elsenburg College.

Once she had graduated, she became the Cape Winemakers Guild’s first woman protégé, with a three-year internship. One of her mentors was Glen Carlou’s David Finlayson, who had just moved to his own farm in Edgbaston.

“From David I took perseverance,” she says.

“When you start a wine farm, it’s frustrating. He had only a few barrels and five tanks.”

Another mentor was Pieter Ferreira of Graham Beck Wines. He taught her the importance of training and working in a team.

“Spending a year with him was the best of everything,” she says of the man she describes as a good teacher who oozes passion.

“That year I got to make my own barrel – a cabernet from one of his blocks.”

In 2011, Praisyl received a full-time job as assistant winemaker at Fleur du Cap. She moved to Zonnebloem in 2013. While she says she is more of a “cabernet sauvignon girl”, she doesn’t want to limit herself to making red wine.

“I feel I’ve got white wine experience and now I’m busy with red. I’m still young and if there are good opportunities out there I’ll grab them with both hands.”

Heinrich Kulsen (assistant winemaker at Nederburg)

Perhaps it’s not surprising that Heinrich ended up working at Nederburg. After all, he grew up with a view of the Paarl estate’s vines and now lives two minutes away from the cellar.

Heinrich studied agriculture at Elsenburg College on a full-time bursary. He then applied for the Cape Winemakers Guild Protégé Programme, which is for graduates who show exceptional talent and which gives previously disadvantaged people a great opportunity to further themselves.

“It was a vigorous process to be accepted,” he says. “But you get exposure to so many types of wine and to so many big names in the industry. And you get to work with and learn from these people who make South Africa’s premium wines. That’s why I applied for the programme and spent three years working as a protégé.”

Heinrich spent time at Ernie Els in a cellar focused on red wines, and gained experience with bubbly at Villiera Wines.

He spent his last mentorship at Hermanuspietersfontein, which gave him experience in making white wines. This proved useful when he joined Nederburg in October last year as assistant white winemaker. He moved to making red wines in August.

Although it is challenging to work with established and lesser-known varieties, Heinrich enjoys learning about making a range of wines. One of the “life-changing” highlights of his three years as a protégé was the time he spent working at a cellar in France.

As a winemaking intern in Burgundy, he worked with chardonnay and pinot noir. He even got to make a wine blend for the annual Cape Winemakers Guild Auction – it was sold to raise funds for other protégés.

“I have to up my game every day. I’m having a huge adventure and so grateful to be learning about winemaking, cellar management, people, and marketing. The more we learn, the more we know what there is still to learn.”