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GROWING IT ALONE

Ntsiki Biyela, the first ever black female winemaker in South Africa, is making her mark in the world of wine

I had no idea about wine. I had never tasted it before and didn't know that it existed. When I finished high school, South African Airways were offering scholarships in oenology. To further my education I took the opportunity.

It wasn't easy studying at Stellenbosch University. My lectures were mostly given in Afrikaans, a language I didn't speak or understand. So I had to learn the majority of the material using notes in English. But I continued

working hard, which is something I was used to doing from my time as a child growing up in Mahlabathini in Zululand.

Just like any other industry that you get into that you don't know, it's difficult. For me, it was the fear of knowing that the industry is white and full of men. But when I started, I had support. I felt that it was okay.

I got a part-time job at Delheim Wine Estate. From there, it wasn't long before I fell in love with wine

and decided that this was the career for me. In January 2004, I joined Stellekaya, a privately owned boutique wine producer in the heart of the Cape Winelands.

My first red wine won a gold medal at the prestigious Michelangelo awards and I was named Landbouweekblad Woman Winemaker of the year in 2009.

There have been a lot of changes in the wine industry. Post-1994, winemakers went outside the country and brought back new ideas from around the world. Young winemakers were also excited to try unknown cultivars rather than sticking to the normal cabernets and merlots.

PERFECT BLEND

Right now, I think we are in the middle of both worlds. There's a New World wine style and an Old World wine style. The combination brings the best into the vines. For example, blends were previously perceived as something that was lower-end. But now we focus on saying that blended wines are the premium wines. Also, consumers are getting excited. And without them getting excited about trying new things, there's no room for us to experiment.

Most wineries are family-owned so to talk about transformation in a family-owned business, people feel like you're invading the family values. And the culture of the industry, when you come in as a black person, doesn't feel welcoming. But when you've been in it for a long time, you make friends and things look different.

Some people will always say that I'm the first black female winemaker, which is fine. I'm okay with that; I've got no issues with it because I can't deny that. I am the first black female winemaker. It's about how a person says it and how it comes across. I've learned that there are things that you need to fight in life and there are things that you don't. This is something I don't have to fight. ●

Interview by **Eugene Yiga**