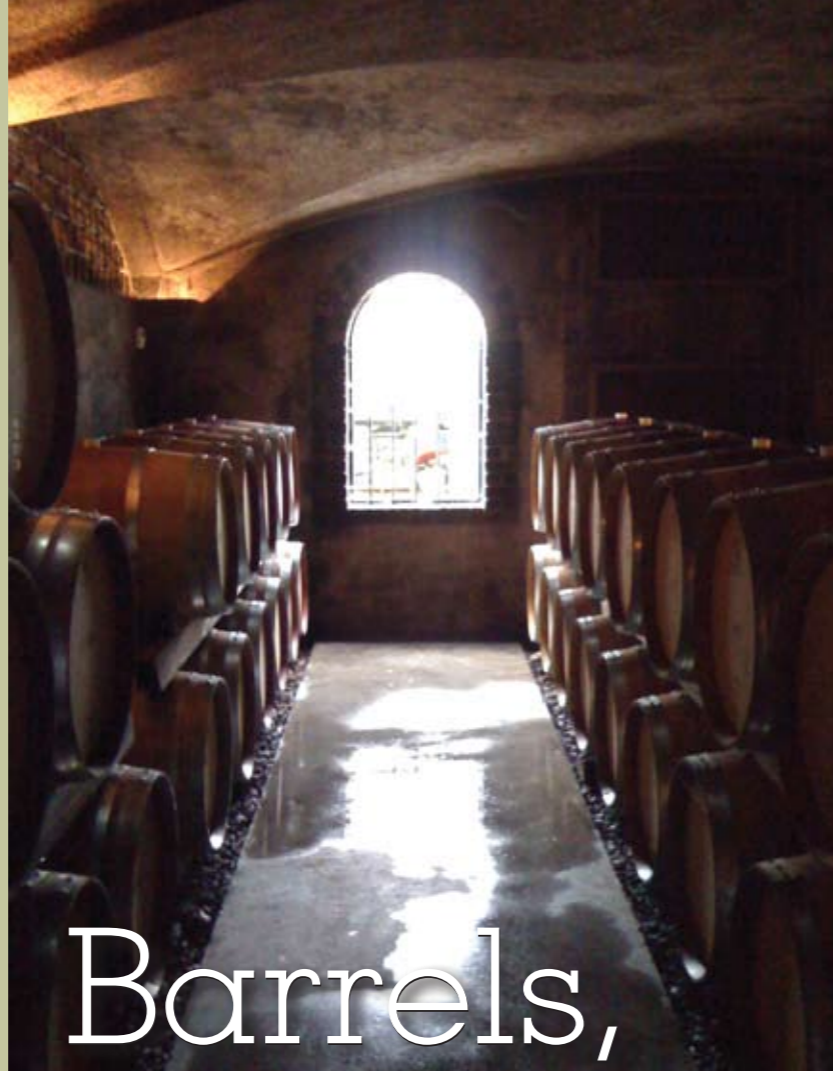


FOCUS ON WOOD



Barrels,

bottles, wine!

A family business starting with supplying barrels has turned into a business where marketing skills, creative thinking and pure determination makes Vinum International a success story of note ten years down the line.

by Wanda Augustyn

The man behind this brand name is self-taught winemaker, Christophe Durand, an ex-Frenchman with heaps of South African flair. Joining him is his beautiful wife, Sabrina, who, with her Psychology degree, is surely helping to make the Newlands Vinum office run smoothly.

Christophe started out in 1997 with Vinum SA and specialised in barrels. The name changed to Vinum International in 2005. Because it's only him and Sabrina, they have a highly focused portfolio – specialising in high grade barrels, tailor made to the customer's requirements, with no factory run stock being produced.

A very successful oak alternative product, the mini-stave, also falls under their portfolio and is the perfect choice for wine ranges where style and positioning requires partial or no barrelling.

Maybe it's his French roots, but Christophe believes in quality, combining traditional craft with the enhancement of quality through modern know-how. This explains the range of three different coopers – Gillet from Burgundy, Bernard from Bordeaux and Mendocino from America.

"Each cooper has its own style, character and methods, resulting in individual barrels that are perfect for

specific wine types. This clarifies our range of three different coopers that produce a spectrum of character covering all quality wine styles."

And it's exactly why they have over 100 wineries in their portfolio of clients – big names such as Vriesenhof, Steenberg, DGB, Spier, Graham Beck, Thelema, Delaire, Amani, Cederbeg and Rijks to name but a few.

Gillet is a family-owned and operated, traditional Burgundian Cooperage with six family members working in different sectors of the business, based deep inside the little village of Saint Romain. They handle everything from oak selection in the forest to sanding the

cover promotion

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finished barrels. Gillet have supplied their finely crafted barrels to top Burgundy Domaines for generations.

Bernard is a third generation family-owned cooperage situated between Cognac and Bordeaux. Having been the first, a generation ago, to divide its focus between Bordeaux and top Rhône producers, Bernard Cooperage has built up an enviable following among the greats of these two regions.

Mendocino in the US produces barrels of 100% American oak, seasoned in California for three years with an emphasis on spices and elegance, moving away from coconut/vanilla flavours that would normally be associated with American oak.

Vinum International covers the entire South African winelands. The company also supplies barrels to Chile and this year also to Greece.

Because barrels are very seasonal, Christophe and Sabrina decided to expand their business and started to import premium quality French bottles. The idea was born after a supplier had approached him with a request for selling their bottles. "I thought why not give it a try? And now we can't stay ahead in supplying these," he laughs.

The bottles start from affordable

quality to high-end heavyweights available in a range of colours and finishes. And yes, although he's a traditional guy, he has bottles that close with both corks and screwcaps.

"The secret is quality. You have to have it. And you must be in constant contact with your customers. Quality service is non-negotiable." Being a winemaker surely helps, as I can understand and relate to their needs.

And if barrels and bottles were not enough, Christophe has turned to winemaking, making a beautiful Chardonnay and Shiraz. He buys his grapes from Franschoek and Constantia. His

"The wine is a dream come true. It has grown wings and started to fly."

Shiraz comes from Simonsberg and Elgin. After initially making wine in his garage, he quickly turned to Steenberg for help where he will make the next few vintages of Vins d'Orrance.

And as owner/winemaker for Vins d'Orrance wines, Christophe Durand can associate with the need for quality products in the winemaking process.

His wines have received high acclaim with the Shiraz being voted as one of the top three Shiraz wines from South Africa by French publication *La Revue du Vin de France* and also scoring 92 points in *Wine Spectator June 2008*. Christophe's wine is available locally, but 85% are exported to France, Sweden, USA, Belgium, Malaysia and Switzerland.

"Chardonnay and Shiraz are my favourite cultivars to work with and to enjoy drinking. Next year I will try my hand at Pinot Noir and Chenin Blanc, as I managed to source stunning grapes around the Cape Peninsula.

"The wine is a dream come true," he says of this third component of his business. "It is actually more about the barrels and the bottles. The wine has grown wings and started to fly. We took such small steps. We have a lot against us in South Africa and it's so important to keep that in mind when you're importing stuff. Everything impacts on that.

"But for now I am happy. We have a 10% market share. That's not bad if you look at how small we are. The bottles opened a whole new market for us; it's ever-growing and at such a fast pace. I just have to keep up!" w

VINUM
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