

Christian Eedes writes about Catherine Marshall Wines

Author: Christian Eedes

Published: 21 Sep 07

In what perhaps amounts to a coming of age, the collaboration first known as the Barefoot Wine Company, and then as BWC Wines, is now called Catherine Marshall Wines, after the individual principally responsible for making the wines - although she personally prefers to go by the less formal "Cathy" rather than "Catherine".

Marshall and partners began with one wine from the 1997 vintage, namely a Pinot Noir. The company has never owned vineyards, rather opting to buy in grapes in the tradition of the French *négociants*. She recounts that this resulted in a "nomadic existence" for her and her partners with them moving from (rented) cellar to cellar over the years. Now, however, the company is to have a more permanent base in Elgin.

In addition to making wine under her own label, Marshall has worked for various other wineries. She has done much to establish the reputation of Ridgeback in Paarl, for instance, with this property's maiden vintage Shiraz 2001 as elaborated by her rating 5 Stars in the 2003 edition of the Platter guide. Today, she remains technical advisor to Ridgeback as well as another Paarl farm called Lindhorst but intends devoting more time to her own wines in future. "It's taken time to realise the Catherine Marshall brand has value," she says with typical modesty.

The greatest appeal of Marshall's wines to date is that they've tended to possess an idiosyncratic quality that differentiated them from their all-too-often homogenised counterparts. The current set of releases however seems to display a pleasing overall lift in quality without any of the wines sacrificing their trademark singularity.

First up is a Sauvignon Blanc 2007, which is a tank selection on the part of Marshall of wine made by Diemersdal's Thys Louw, a young winemaker who is showing himself to be an emerging talent with this variety. It's an elegant, medium-bodied little number showing lime fruit and finishing bone dry. It has an approximate retail price of R53 a bottle.

Then there's a Syrah 2005 (R89 a bottle) and a Syrah Mourvèdre 2005 (R120) with Marshall very much taking her cue from the Rhône. "In South Africa, we can easily make wines in the style of St Joseph or Crozes Hermitage although we're still not achieving wines with the quality and character of Hermitage," she observes.

The Syrah in both instances was sourced from Ridgeback while the Mourvèdre in the case of the blend came from organically farmed vineyards in Malmesbury. Marshall relates that since the grapes come from warm climate areas, she is confronted by the problem that acid tends to fall away before picking. She says she wants to retain a sense of "nervousness" in her wines and consequently tends to "pick this rather than that side of ripeness" - something that seems to have favoured the Syrah Mourvèdre in particular with it showing a concentration of flavour while not being at all overdone.

Marshall relates that she was compelled to retain the single variety Syrah in the range due to market demand, but is convinced that blending is the means to achieve wines of greater complexity under local conditions. By adding a touch of Mourvèdre to her Syrah, she feels she gets a wine that is "denser without becoming obvious".

However winning the Rhône-style wines are from Marshall, it is her new Pinot Noir that is perhaps most impressive. According to her, a crucial determinant of achieving success with Pinot Noir is that the fruit be farmed under cool climate conditions, so what better region to source grapes than Elgin? Her 2006 vintage incorporates 90% of fruit produced by James Downes, a member of the family that owns Shannon Vineyards and quickly acquiring a reputation for being one of the most meticulous growers around.

What is striking about Marshall's 2006 is just how pure the fruit is without it becoming simple. Downes's vineyards were planted as recently as 2001 and 2002 and Marshall worries that the resulting fruit is a little hollow on mid-palate but that's a minor quibble. You feel that in a few more years or so, the well-known Pinot Noir producers of Walker Bay will have some serious competition.

The wine also benefits from not being over-oaked - it spent 11 months in barrel of which only 10% was new. Marshall suggests that this was purely "a matter of economics" in the sense that she couldn't afford more new wood than that but it's debatable whether the wine is any the poorer. "I want my Pinot Noir to be pretty and delicate with plenty of cranberry as well as red and black cherry fruit." Buy a bottle of the 2006 at R92 and see just what a good job she's made of this.