The Art of Winemaking: Terroir

At Creation we celebrate the fact that we have received ‘Estate’ status, a term referring to the fact that the wines under the Creation label are grown and made on the farm. Right from the start it has been our intention to harness the full potential of our land in order to create site-specific wines reflecting our unique terroir. It is indeed this ‘sense of place’ that makes our wines so distinctive.

The art of winemaking begins long before the first grapes are ever harvested or the first barrels ever filled. The art of winemaking begins with the land itself, the essence of which lives in every bottle.

At Creation Wines, situated in the Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge Ward of Walker Bay, we consider it a privilege to have discovered 40 hectares of virgin soils, never planted to vines before, in 2002. Establishing a vineyard and winery from scratch was a
daunting task. However, the blank canvas offered Swiss viticulturist and winemaker Jean-Claude (JC) Martin and his South African wife Carolyn, marketing director, an exciting opportunity to craft quality wines in an idyllic setting while raising their young family in the nearby seaside town of Hermanus.

Part of the foundation of any successful wine estate is the suitability of its soils to plant vines, and more specifically the suitability of different cultivars and clones to the climate, soil types, elevation, proximity to the ocean and other environmental factors which collectively give a vineyard site its ‘terroir’. The Hemel-en-Aarde area, comprising the Valley, Upper Valley and Ridge, is renowned for producing high quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, two cultivars JC grew up with and loves working with.

The area has however also been very successfully planted to a number of other cultivars, and the unique conditions on the Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge led JC to believe that conditions could support a diverse range of cultivars producing quality grapes, both red and white. This belief was confirmed by valuable local advice from viticultural consultant Johan Pienaar and
JC’s father-in-law, Walter Finlayson, who had established many a vineyard in his time.

The elements of terroir are difficult to define, but two of the most crucial aspects when assessing a new vineyard site are the combination of macro-, meso-, and micro-climates and the composition and structure of the soil.

The results of soil studies indicate that Creation is situated on 450-million-year-old clay loam soils with decomposed Bokkeveld shale with diverse soil forms comprising different combinations of Tukulu, Oakleaf, Pinedene, Swartland, Estcourt and Klapmuts – overall of medium to high potential with clay rich sub-soils for adequate water retention and good organic content. The mineral content of the soil is essential for healthy, virus-free canopy growth and the development of healthy fruit; water retention prevents water stress, which benefits the tannin structure of the wine.
Macro-climate refers to the climate of the region in which the vineyard is situated – in this case the temperate maritime climate of Walker Bay, an area receiving approximately 700 mm of rain annually – enough to support unirrigated farming in most cases. The meso-climate is the unique combination of factors such as elevation and slope aspect that set each vineyard site apart from others in the same macro-climate.

At Creation there is an array of slopes of varying degrees and with a variety of aspects that cover most points on the compass. The slope and aspect of a site is vital in relation to the angle of sunlight reaching the grape, number of sunlight hours received and prevailing winds.

The farm is just 8 km from the Atlantic Ocean and its cooling breezes, nestled in the rolling foothills of the Babylonstoren Mountain, where the average temperature during the growing season rarely exceeds 30 degrees Celsius and the elevation of 290m above sea level contributes to a cool night index of 12
degrees Celsius less than the midday temperature – a key influence on the retention of well-balanced natural acidity during ripening.

The micro-climate in turn refers to the climatic conditions surrounding individual bunches of grapes. This is most influenced by vine modification such as pruning and vine architecture and canopy management practices altering airflow and sunlight penetration.

The ethos of our winemaking team is to interfere as little as possible in the transition from grape to wine – to best express the sense of place that terroir bestows on a wine, and to do that they need the best possible grapes. With so many nuances, each contributing something unique to the growth pattern of the vine, the point of all this is really quite simple: top quality fruit is no accident. There is an art to pairing specific cultivars with specific sites and Creation Wines is blessed with a unique confluence of climate and soil, resulting in healthy, balanced, perfectly ripe and full-
flavoured grapes of outstanding quality; allowing us to create complex wines of rare balance, elegance, distinction and finesse.