

BRAVE OLD WORLD

The restless former owner of France's Château Pichon-Lalande tells us why screw caps, Shiraz and South Africa's Cape are the future.

After 28 years of running a Bordeaux Second Growth, Château Pichon-Lalande, May-Eliane de Lencquesaing sold her family's property to Champagne Roederer in 2006. Although a heartbreaking decision, her children weren't interested in taking over from her. Not someone to sit and reflect, de Lencquesaing turned her attention to Glenelly, the South African property she had purchased in 2003.



WINE ENTHUSIAST: What is the appeal of South Africa?

MAY-ELIANE DE LENCQUESAING:

First, I recognized its quality potential: South Africa belongs to the Old World and shouldn't be compared with Australia, but also wine has been made in the Cape for as long as in the Médoc, so that's a historical parallel. History, too, plays a role with the Huguenots, who left everything after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, fled France and started again here in 1688. I felt it necessary, now that I've lived my life, to do something important, although this was a much bigger project than I initially wanted. My friends, of course, thought I was crazy. But there are times one has to put reason aside, be a little unreasonable and creative.

WE: Stellenbosch is well reputed for quality, but did you look elsewhere?

MdL: I looked everywhere. I wanted a small farm but most were planted to vines with leafroll virus, which I'd have had to uproot. Glenelly had fruit trees, so it was virgin soil. I knew I wanted a place with plenty of sun, not in a narrow valley. I saw Glenelly with its wonderful, exposed east-facing slopes, immediately fell in love with the place and bought

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it two days later. A bonus was the established team, who had worked for the previous owners and all my friends here helped.

WE: You have planted the red Bordeaux varieties—Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot—because they also have a track record here, but what do you believe South Africa can still learn from the Bordelais?

MdL: Above all, until South Africa can present vertical tastings of well-aged wines, it won't be considered a great wine region. Also, if we want respect for and interest in our wines, they must be balanced and elegant, two key words for great wines, and have personality.

WE: But you've also introduced Shiraz and Chardonnay, varieties not grown in Bordeaux; why is this?

MdL: Well, for a start, South Africa isn't bound to specific varieties as we are in France. I think Shiraz does well in this climate and I love Burgundy, but the soils on Glenelly aren't suited to Sauvignon Blanc, which is grown in Bordeaux.

WE: Another breakaway from the Bordeaux tradition is that you are using screw caps on your Glass Collection range of varietal wines.

MdL: Why use cork on bottles that will be opened within two years? It's a waste. Screw caps are also easier; it's the modern way to look at things and they don't harm quality.

WE: You are very active in looking after your workers and ensuring their children are educated. Why is this aspect important to you?

MdL: As a child I was a girl guide; my sons were wolf cubs and when there was no one else to take over, I became chief cub. When our family returned to Flanders in 1971, I opened summer camps for children and ran them for 25 years, so I have a long history of helping to give children a broad education. Here, after school, the children are fed, rested, then do schoolwork. Television is my enemy! To generate creativity, I read them stories, then have them dress up and interpret the story with words and mime. It pleases me greatly that children not initially in the program have asked to be included.

WE: You look and act like someone much younger. What is your secret?

MdL: Being creative and keeping my brain active. Every day when I get up I think about what I can do that is creative—it's in my Mialhe genes. —ANGELA LLOYD