

The business of building a contemporary organic wine brand

Two young Capetonians are changing the way South Africans see wine culture with a "local is lekker" brand by the name of Green Shebeen.



With their down-to-earth wine drinking and business model, Marthinus Botha and De Vos Meaker are winning over a new generation of eco-conscious consumers in South Africa's cluttered wine market.

In a joint venture with Org de Rac Estate in the Swartland, Botha and Meaker have created a wine brand that is contemporary and hip, yet based on age-old organic farming methods. The result is a premium organic wine that is accessible, fun and totally unpretentious.

How did Green Shebeen come to be?

Marthinus: *In 2011 De Vos' dad, Frank, who is both a wine maker and consultant, informed us of an organic wine farm that had an excess inventory of high-quality wine. It presented a good opportunity to solve their problem and make a buck in the process. We initially wanted to sell the wine to students at a bargain price, but after some pondering we realised that with the quality of wine we had access to we could add real value here. After some further pondering we created a clearly differentiated brand that enforces the quality organic wine we offer.*

De Vos *When our original quick scheme turned into a more serious venture, we exposed ourselves to the highly competitive wine industry. Soon we realised that it would be necessary to partner up with the estate Org de Rac in order to make Green Shebeen a viable venture.*

What inspired the distinctly South African "chilled-out vibe" behind the Green Shebeen brand?

Marthinus: *We wanted to create a brand that has appeal to a younger and more contemporary consumer. We felt that virtually all the brands on the market producing premium quality products occupied very traditional brand positions, hinged on attributes such "heritage" or "tradition" that are perhaps not very relevant to a modern 20-something-year-old.*

Walk us through a typical Green Shebeen work day.

Marthinus: *The day typically starts with a cup of coffee or two while reading the morning news, Twitter etc. Then it's into the inbox, to catch up on emails for the better part of the morning, which may be followed by a meeting or phone calls to various suppliers or sales reps. As is the case with most start-up entrepreneurs who wear a lot of different hats, our days are quite dynamic.*

De Vos: *We also personally do a lot of field work, such as tastings and promotional activities, which is a great way to interact and engage with our customers.*

Have you always loved wine? Which variety of Green Shebeen is your favourite?

Marthinus: *I used to be more of a white wine guy, but I've gotta say, these days I'm hooked on the Green Shebeen Cab Sauv!*

De Vos: *Yes, for sure. I was fortunate to grow up in the Winelands where you are frequently exposed to the wine culture and the bug will inevitably catch you. My preference depends on the vibe and the weather, lately The Blend provides great comfort in the winter.*

Your wines boast "certified organic" status. In a nutshell, what does that entail?

Marthinus: *It basically means that the grapes used to make the wine were not treated with any chemicals, such as pesticides, herbicides or artificial fertiliser. In the wine-making process itself there are substantially fewer sulphites added (we use about 30% of what is legally allowed in the production of traditional wines). It is impractical to eliminate the use of sulphites completely as they are used to stabilise and preserve the wine - without a small amount of sulphites wine would very quickly turn into vinegar. At the end of the day, what we have is a more pure and natural product.*

Eco-consumerism is on the rise and Green Shebeen is certainly in the right position at the right time. What kind of trends are you seeing in this area?

Marthinus: *Cascading from the higher LSM groups, we think that there is certainly a shift in consumer preference to more healthy, environmentally friendly and ethically sourced products. The world is more connected today than ever before; the result of this is a lot more power for consumers because they can now demand choice. It is, however, important to acknowledge that product quality and taste still comes before anything else, therefore it's essential to commit the effort in making sure that environmentally friendly or healthy products deliver in these areas.*

Notwithstanding the above, the "eco-consumer" is still a niche segment in South Africa where we typically lag a few years behind developed economies such as the UK and the US. The latter, which experienced annual organic wines sales of USD26 billion and year-on-year growth of 22% according to an industry report released a couple of years ago. We think statistics like these are indicative of the trend that can be expected in South Africa in the coming years. Food retail groups should, consequently, start preparing themselves for the rise of the natural generation. Until this time, however, it will remain essential for organic wine producers to export the majority of production in order to keep sales volume up and maintain financial viability, which is why we are fortunate to have recently shipped our first consignment to popular US-based retail group, Whole Foods Market.

There is some debate around organic wines regarding quality and whether they are truly better for the environment. Many winemakers swear by the use of sulphites as the only way to produce wines with greater complexity, tertiary

sensations as well as roundness.

What sets Green Shebeen apart?

Marthinus: *We don't think it's debatable that without the use of chemicals, such as pesticides, there is a lesser impact on natural ecosystems than would be the case with traditional farming methods. As mentioned previously, our wines do contain a very small amount of necessary sulphites. There are some producers who do offer "sulphur free" organic wine; however it is especially difficult to deliver consistent quality and taste with this constraint, and we believe ultimately not worth it.*

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