

Arts&Leisure

Wine

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MOST dedicated South African wine drinkers probably don't know the name of the most successful brand of Cape wine ever to have been exported from these shores. Asked to hazard a guess, they might suggest Nederburg or Roodeberg. It's unlikely that the name "Kumala" would ever come up, mainly because it has never had a domestic market presence.

The creation of Roger Gabb, who turned his company Western Wines into one of the most successful distributors in the UK, the Kumala brand sold more than 3-million cases in its heyday. To put that volume in context, the production cellars were

required to process 50 000 tons of grapes annually and to dispatch at least one 6m container every working day of the year.

Even more remarkably, it achieved this with virtually no South African assets. (At one stage it was rumoured that the only item on its books in the Cape was a bakkie — everything it traded was sourced from growers and co-operative cellars.) In 2004 the Gabbs sold the business to Vincor — which in turn was taken over by Constellation, the world's largest wine company in 2006.

In 1996 Roger and Annie Gabb found themselves tempted into buying a small estate — called Journey's End — on the lower slopes of the Hottentots Holland alongside Sir Lowry's Village near Somerset West. The location was well chosen: for the Gabbs it offered extraordinary views of False Bay in an environment with acknowledged viticultural potential. Literally a slope away from Vergelegen's now famous Schaapenberg site, it now seems self-

evident that Journey's End would become a source of fine wines. This outcome was far less certain at the time — Vergelegen had yet to establish its reputation, there was no cellar on Morgenster, and the development of nearby Lourensford had not yet begun.

Journey's End's first vintage was the somewhat unprepossessing 2002 — notorious for its damp, uneven ripening conditions and for a high percentage of rot-infected grapes. It was in this unlikeliest of years that

the Journey's End's winemaking team truly distinguished itself. Its maiden release Chardonnay won a Platter Five Star rating. This was not a chance result: thoughtful fruit management, careful cellar practices and at least one high-risk decision, which turned out to be prescient, contributed to this outcome. For the Gabbs, it was a dream launch pad.

Since then Journey's End has simply ambled along. However, considering its stellar arrival, the value of its location and the trade savvy of its proprietor there has been a sense of opportunity deferred, if not actually wasted.

Part of its problem has been the absence of its own cellar: you can't live forever on space borrowed in someone else's winery. Finally the Gabbs had to decide whether Journey's End was a home with a view surrounded by vineyards, or a serious wine property.

Unsurprisingly they have decided to go the whole hog and last week a new cellar, replete with barrel

storage and a tasting room was unveiled. It is a thoughtfully designed — functional rather than flash — wine factory and it should contribute a great deal to the property's sense of place as well as to the quality of what goes into bottle.

A tasting of about 10 of the estate's wines — going back to the 2002 Chardonnay — suggests that at this stage Journey's End is a better source of whites than reds. It offers some splendid Chardonnays, from its relatively inexpensive Haystack bottling all the way through to its "Destination" cuvée.

With the exception of the sumptuous 2002, the youngest releases were consistently the better wines. Clearly the farming practices of Paul Fourie are now beginning to optimise the specifics of the site, while winemaker Leon Esterhuizen is becoming increasingly adept at managing his fruit. Journey's End is starting to make some of the Cape's best Chardonnays. It seems the days of travelling hopefully may be over.