

## The future looks promising 5 March 2007

**L'Avenir seems set to prosper under new owner Michel Laroche, reports Angela Lloyd**

Michel Laroche is a breath of French flair; his clean good looks have often graced the back page of Decanter advertising his Chablis wines (no surprise to learn he was once a more general photographic model!) and his charm is instantaneous. 'Why did you choose to invest in South Africa?' I asked. 'Because your country is so beautiful,' he beams with Gallic charisma.

With wine interests not only here and Chablis but also the Languedoc and Chile, Laroche is as shrewd as businessman as he is a public relations dream. As the fifth generation of Laroche involved in the family's Chablis wine business, he is steeped in wine and comes with more than a sound knowledge of how to succeed in an industry notorious for a lack of stability and continuous prey to fashion.

Laroche also knows exactly what he wants in his wines. This became apparent as we tasted the 2006s, his first vintage since he acquired L'Avenir in 2005 from another French-speaking charmer, Marc Wiehe from Mauritius.

'The grape gives fruit, why not show off that fruit?', runs Laroche's inarguable logic, a route he follows through to the logical conclusion of using screwcap closures – yes, even on his Grands Crûs Chablis! The new and promising winemaking incumbent at L'Avenir, Tinus Els (*left in pic, with Laroche*), has served Laroche's ideal well in this first year; yes, the wines (all varietal at present) show off a delightful purity of fruit but, unlike many others, these also combine elegance and structural back-up.



Perhaps the wine that illustrates Laroche's approach and chablisien background best and reflects the greatest change from the previous regime is the Chardonnay 2006. A mere 13percent is barrel-fermented and only a portion has gone through the softening effects of malolactic fermentation. 'No oak, no complexity,' he maintains, 'a little is best.' This certainly holds true in the 2006, which shows elegance, subtlety and interest.

That said, it greatly pleased the local media to hear Laroche confirm his support for local specialities chenin blanc and pinotage. He also endeared himself to the Afrikaans-speaking contingent when he urged Els to address guests in that language as well as English. 'Of course I can understand,' he claimed; 'wine is understandable in any language!'

Laroche has already received the nod from his fellow countrymen for his 2006 Chenin Blanc, which was rated one of the top five white wines on last year's Santé Classic Wine Trophy.

L'Avenir's Pinotage is often spoken of as top of the pile; Laroche is determined that it will gain even further lustre under his guardianship. While the 2006 reds have yet to be bottled, the two versions tasted as samples – a regular and Grand Vin, the latter from older, low-yielding bush vines – made it clear L'Avenir doesn't intend moving from its elevated position. The wines will be priced to reflect this: R105 for the regular, R210 for the Grand Vin. Both are very much in the familiar L'Avenir style, though oaking again is very sympathetically handled. A hint of decidedly un-trendy banana, a no-no for Laroche, raised some eyebrows but soon disappears in the glass; it remains to be seen if this is case once the wine is bottled, but overall the duo are among a select few that fill me with enthusiasm for the grape.

The wine that elicited the most excitement, however, wasn't pinotage but the sample of cabernet franc. Fresh with exuberant spicy, leafy aromatics, loads of flavour squeezed into its focused, light texture and brisk bite of tannin all briefly harmonised in older French barriques, it's what South Africa has been crying out for – a summer red. Now all the team have to do is get this fresh, fruity and dry wine into the bottle as is! Queries regarding price were initially met with a typical French shrug but let's hope the eventual Laroche guess of around R60 is what appears on the price list. It will be a hit and will hopefully encourage others to develop reds along similar lines.

The changes at L'Avenir since Laroche purchased the property in 2005 – new wines, new labels, re-furbished and re-named accommodation – L'Avenir Country Lodge rather than Guest House – the acquisition of neighbouring Sentinel, have happened at a whirlwind pace, with professionalism and with the intention of fitting in with rather than imposing on 'this beautiful country.'

Michel Laroche, the latest among the modern day generation of French winemaking immigrants, appears to be imbuing the Cape winelands with a breath of fresh air and L'Avenir with an auspicious future.