

MAY DE LENCQUESAING

A STORY OF GRACE AND INSPIRATION

ARTICLE **JANET WITHINGTON** | **THE DARLING WINE SHOP**

There was a very special party held in Stellenbosch recently to celebrate the 100th birthday of Madame May-Eliane de Lencquesaing, owner of Glenelly Wine Estate

We first met Madame de Lencquesaing in 1988, when Charles was working at Rustenberg Wine Estate and she was part of a visiting delegation of Bordeaux wine producers. I still remember the moment that this charming, if formidable person who hailed impressively from the legendary Chateau Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande, was introduced.

Her accolades are legion – amongst others Decanter Woman of the Year in 1994 and one-time president of the London-based International Wine and Spirit Competition, apart from recognition from her own countrymen with France's highest distinction, the Légion d'Honneur. During her time with the IWSC she became increasingly familiar with South African wines, and some of our leading winemakers who to this day remain good and valued friends.

In 2003 at the age of 78 years, May bought Glenelly (in her own words – crazy!) at the foot of the Simonsberg, and at that stage a fruit farm, which ticked all her meticulous requirements. Up and down Ida's Valley, home of beautiful Cape Dutch houses, eyebrows shot skywards as long-time residents monitored the huge concrete and glass cellar being built into the mountainside. Today it blends seamlessly into its surroundings, and is a monument to environmental harmony, specifically designed for energy conservation – all this embraced by a not-so-young person from a traditional background.

Charles and I have shared wonderful moments at Glenelly; a visit by a group from Darling wineries where over dinner, May chose to sit with junior staff rather than owners, and left a lasting impression; extraordinary conversations over tea and carrot cake, about her huge interest in the archaeology of the Valley and the artefacts found on the farm which she has displayed in her house; her pride that one of the children on the farm is now studying at Stellenbosch University; and not



MADAME DE LENCQUESAING WITH NICK PENTZ

forgetting the ghastly time when Charles was expansively indicating with his arm, the sweep of the view from the house to fellow luncheon guests, and knocked over and broke a treasured canine sculpture standing sentinel at the front door!

Madame (or Lady May as she is affectionately known, also the name of her flagship red wine, internationally respected and which represents the pinnacle of Glenelly winemaking) is still giving and sharing in the belief that good wines bring people together whilst attributing her health and longevity to a glass or two daily. She has led an extraordinary life; as a young teenager during WW2 she would travel on her bicycle, pedalling past Nazi soldiers to take food to Jewish refugees in hiding at Chateau Palmer, at that time owned by her father, and later as a military wife married to her career army husband General de Lencquesaing with whom she spent several years in Kansas.

It is not surprising therefore that discipline has touched every aspect of her life, not least of all in her approach to winemaking. Living mostly in Switzerland now, she phones her winemaker at the same time on the same day of every week.

Why not take the drive to Stellenbosch and pay a visit to the Winery to sample those very special wines, enjoy lunch at the Vine Bistro and then marvel at Madame May's private glass collection which covers two thousand years from Roman times to contemporary pieces? You will then surely have travelled at least a small part of May de Lencquesaing's incredible journey with wine.

