

## SA WOMAN WINEMAKER OF THE YEAR

# Ntsiki takes the honours

**MARLI VAN WYNGAARD**

“**S**ILENCE. It feels like the silence before you open a bottle of wine. When you have the corkscrew in the cork, and there is that moment of silence before it pops open.”

That is how Ntsiki Biyela from Stellegaya in Stellenbosch describes her feelings after she was crowned SA Woman Winemaker of the Year last Thursday evening.

Out of 64 wine entries from 28 woman winemakers across the country, Ntsiki came out on top. This is the sixth year that this competition, sponsored by *Landbouweekblad*, was held.

“I am looking forward to the adventure that awaits me. Actually, I don’t have the words to describe how I feel or what to expect from now on - that’s the problem,” Ntsiki laughingly admits.

The story of the young girl Nontsikelelo from Zululand, who started her career pruning vineyards at Delheim, will warm any heart. After she matriculated from Mahlabathini High School in 1996, she became a domestic worker to save money for her studies. Although she wanted to study engineering, her uncle introduced her to wine-



Here is Ntsiki Biyela (right) with her award and Nicolette Waterford, one of the judges, from Stellenbosch. Pic: **Marli van Wyngaard**

maker Jabulani Ntshangase. He helped her apply for a scholarship, and she was chosen as one of ten black students to pursue a bursary programme to study winemaking at the University of Stellenbosch.

“I remember Ntsiki working as a student in our vineyards, pruning, putting all the men to shame. Come rain or sunshine, she was always positive, hard working, and nothing was ever too difficult for her,” says Victor Sperling of Delheim.

Later Ntsiki worked in their tasting room where she learnt more about wine.

“I grew up in Zululand,

so wine was not exactly part of my culture. Studying at Stellenbosch, and being exposed to wine regularly, I could not help falling in love with wine and the wine-making process. It all started to make sense to me when I did some practical work, including tastings at Delheim. Then I knew that I was hooked,” Ntsiki told the judges.

She started working at Stellegaya in 2004, where she is still happily making wonderful wines.

“But I will always always remember the Delheim family. You never forget where you come from,” she says.

“As one of the first black woman winemakers in South Africa, I want to be remembered for my wines and not for who I am, but I do not mind being a role model for other people. I want to communicate that with hard work and determination, you can achieve anything.”

According to Ntsiki the SA Woman Winemaker of the Year competition is a very important one for women winemakers.

“We need this. Our industry is still very much a ‘man’s world’. But this competition offers us a platform from which we can work with pride. From here we will make our mark in the wine industry.”