

First SA black-owned wine lab launched

Former Spier Wine Farm employee, Merecia Smith, has launched South Africa's first black-owned wine analysis laboratory.



Merecia Smith

Through financial support, mentoring and purchasing guarantees, Spier has long assisted former employees to develop their own thriving independent micro-enterprises. Other examples include Lingomso Caterers who runs the staff canteen, Mountainview Tank Services, a bulk wine transport service and Primo Vino Packaging and Reworks, which customises and repackages wine bottles.

"Mercia joined our farm in 1998 as a general worker and first started working in the wine analysis laboratory four years later. Her hard work and passion for accuracy saw her rise through the ranks, from being an assistant to ultimately becoming the lab's manager in 2018. With Spier's support, Merecia launched her business, Wine Analytical Services (WASLab) in July 2019," says Andrew Milne, Spier CEO.

Developing entrepreneurs forms part of Spier's Growing for Good initiatives that empower communities to create positive social and environmental change.

The science behind the art of winemaking

Smith's laboratory plays a crucial role in the winemaking process.

Through the nearly 20 tests she can do on wine samples, she is able to provide winemakers with vital scientific information (such as levels of acidity, alcohol and sugar). This enables them to make informed decisions on whether they should make adjustments to the wine. For example, the test results will help them decide whether they should add more sulphur or whether the wine needs more filtration to achieve greater clarity. Tests of sugar, pH and total acidity on grapes also help our winemakers figure out when vineyards are ready for harvest.

"I really enjoy doing analysis – it's satisfying knowing that I'm helping to make good wine even better," says Smith. "The winemakers trust us – they know they can sleep safely because the analysis is in good hands."

During a busy month, she will analyse up to 500 samples; in a quieter one, she sees 250. All of this is done by hand using a range of contraptions with Sci-Fi-sounding names, such as the Mettler Toledo Autotitrator DL22, the spectrophotometer and the refractometer. Smith uses her newly acquired density meter to test alcohol levels (as well as the wine's specific gravity). Previously, alcohol testing was a laborious process that took her about two hours. The new equipment can give results in as fast as five minutes.

Smith says the key qualities to ensure a high-performing lab is to be accurate, reliable, trustworthy and honest. Speed is valued too – at the busiest times of year, she's often expected to return results within a single day.

Her lab participates in monthly analyses organised by the SA Wine Lab Association where she is required to evaluate two unknown samples and submit the results for checking by industry peers. She is proud that her most recent results all scored As and Bs for accuracy. "Having this external evaluation of the quality of our services is important – it gives us credibility and shows that we are doing a good job," she says.

A helping hand

"Initially I found the idea of leaving full-time employment to launch my own business rather intimidating. But I felt reassured by the support Spier was willing to offer me to help get my business off the ground," says Smith.

Spier provides WAS Laboratory with accounting and administrative services, allowing Smith to focus on her lab work. Over the next few years, mentoring from Spier staff will help her to gain the business know-how she needs to operate fully independently.

Now that she's hit her stride with Spier as her main client, Smith has also grown her business by signing on five small cellars nearby. With more work, she hopes to expand her team – allowing her to enjoy a much-deserved bit of holiday.

"At Spier, doing good is what drives us as a business," explains Milne. "The support we've shown Merecia – and the other former employees who have also launched their own businesses – is a manifestation of this purpose. By empowering entrepreneurs, we are catalysing growth and positive change that will ripple far beyond our own business."