

# The future is Blacc

SOMMELIERS, BARTENDERS AND GRASSROOTS ENTHUSIASTS ARE EMPOWERING THEMSELVES TO BECOME AMBASSADORS AND THE FUTURE OF THE WINE INDUSTRY.

BY LISA LOTTERING

# L

LAUNCHED FOUR YEARS AGO, Black Cellar Club (Blacc) aim is to help people in the South African hospitality industry improve their knowledge of wine and premium spirits. Today the nonprofit organisation has nearly 3 000 members, all with a thirst for knowledge and hopes of becoming ambassadors for the industry.

The club's name and catchy acronym was created by newly elected chairperson Aubrey Ngcungama. Blacc is a communication mechanism and networking platform for sommeliers and beverage ambassadors across Africa.

Some immediately assume the club is exclusively for black people, but it's not. "It's a mind shift we're subtly playing with," says Ian Manley, founder of Blacc and owner of its parent company, Vula Afrika. His idea was to uplift the grassroots audience such as waiters and bartenders in the wine industry. "Geographically the Cape is the heartbeat of wine production and Blacc is all about promoting South African wine," he says.

## GROWING MEMBERSHIP

The club has gained exposure and interest both locally and internationally because of its authenticity. Since its launch, Blacc's membership has grown to nearly 3 000 members aged 18-60.

Ian says people hear about Blacc through its members and contact him directly on WhatsApp if they want to join. He says WhatsApp is the key communication platform because many of Blacc members are from rural areas.



Newly elected Blacc chairperson Aubrey Ngcungama.

"Members are expected to ensure that those interested in joining Blacc are as authentic as the club."

Blacc's members are predominately from Cape Town and the surrounding areas, but it also has members in Johannesburg and KwaZulu-Natal. The club hopes to expand its international membership. "I want to start with London and Washington DC to promote South African wines," Aubrey says. "This way consumers can enjoy South African wines globally through the club – especially after what we've been through this year."

## BLACC MONDAY

The club's Blacc Monday initiative to introduce sommeliers and stewards to winemakers and owners has taken off. A group of 10-50 members visit wine estates to explore vineyards, meet winemakers and conduct tastings, Aubrey says. The estates sponsor a comprehensive day which includes transportation from the V&A Waterfront, Cape Town, to the destination. "Blacc members don't usually have the opportunity to visit these farms because they might feel intimidated," Aubrey says. "This is the perfect opportunity for them to feel comfortable in this space."

Wine estates in turn can promote their wines to a group of people who'll most likely one day sell their products. "The members become ambassadors for the estates they visit," Ian says. Black Mondays focus on learning and creating a platform for wine enthusiasts to meet likeminded people in the industry.

Blacc also gives producers a platform to promote their brand to a bigger audience during these visits, Aubrey says. "It's important to note that the organisation is not only for wine stewards, sommeliers or waiters, but for anyone with an interest in the South African drinks business."

## PARTNERSHIPS

In 2018, thanks to the support of wine estates and the spirits industry, Blacc held a two-day festival in Langa near Cape Town. "We wanted to host this in a township because of our grassroots focus and to be authentic to our brand," Ian says. "There's an untapped market in the township areas and the festival was a learning curve."



Julie Killias, Aubrey Ngcungama, DJ Fosta and Ian Manley at the BLACC Fest in Langa in 2018.

The South African Brandy Foundation supported the first Black Monday by sponsoring a visit to KWV Emporium. Blacc stewards and sommeliers have a better understanding of the industry thanks to the input and sponsorships of various owners and wine estates.

Aubrey says this is a friendly way of introducing South African wines to black South Africans "The club supports local wines which open a market to owners and estates. We bridge the gap between wine estates and Blacc members."

## OPPORTUNITIES

Aubrey and Ian agree that Los Angeles resident Tuanni Price is an asset to the club. Tuanni is also one of the new members of Blacc. During the lockdown period, Tuanni who currently lives in Cape Town, held virtual tastings and helped members with their preparation for the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) exams.

Ian says members embraced her virtual seminars during lockdown especially because many had lost their jobs due to Covid-19. She arranged for guest speakers to discuss vineyard processes and winemaking. "We reached out to winemakers who were only too happy to share their knowledge," she says.

Members are hungry to learn but it's difficult for some, especially those from

townships such as Khayelitsha and Langa. For them, Tuanni's masterclasses are a huge help. "I'm all about investing in yourself," she says. "It's about getting members to change their mindsets and to understand that investing in yourself is the most important thing, rather than waiting for someone to invest in you."

## THE FUTURE

Ian hopes to expose Blacc rising stars to France and other Old World or New World wine regions. "For them to experience a harvest would be a wow moment," he says. Blacc also wants to highlight the role of women in the organisation, such as deputy chairperson Praisie Dlamini and upcoming winemakers in the Western Cape, and to establish a black women's chapter.

Aubrey's five-year plan includes establishing a foundation for a Blacc Institute where all the club's interests in education can be housed under one roof. "I would like every South African wine to be housed in a library of wines, and to include an international and spirits corner for educational purposes," he says. "This requires a lot of effort but it will be worth it." ♦