

# WINEMAKING'S RISING STAR

*Mika Engelbrecht – 2024 Diners Club Young Winemaker of the Year*

At just 27 years old, Mika Engelbrecht has not only secured her position as the head winemaker at Stellenbosch's iconic Neethlingshof Estate but has also clinched the prestigious 2024 Diners Club Young Winemaker of the Year award. This remarkable achievement is a testament to her passion, talent, and dedication to the art and science of winemaking, making her one of the most exciting young talents in the South African wine industry.



Born and raised in the coastal town of Hermanus, Mika's journey into winemaking was almost serendipitous. She pursued a BSc in Viticulture and Oenology at Stellenbosch University, combining her love for science and nature. Later, she broadened her knowledge by completing a course in *The Business of Wine* at the University of Cape Town's Business School. Her academic foundation laid the groundwork for what has become a deeply fulfilling career in winemaking.

Yet, Mika's entry into the world of wine was not premeditated. "To be honest, it kind of chose me," she says. The opportunity to merge science with art and embrace the dynamic challenges of seasonal variations ignited her passion for the field. "It's not your average nine-to-five job," she adds, reflecting on the unpredictable yet rewarding nature of her chosen path.

## A HOMECOMING AT NEETHLINGSHOF

Mika's connection to Neethlingshof runs deep. She first worked at the estate during the 2019 harvest as part of her final-year practical studies. Little did she know that she would return a few





years later, this time as head winemaker, tasked with shaping the future of one of Stellenbosch's most historic wineries.

Her return to Neethlingshof marked a proud moment in her career. "As a 27-year-old, I would have never thought I'd be given the opportunity to be a winemaker at one of the most historic wine farms in Stellenbosch," she says. This role has allowed her to channel her creativity and leadership into crafting wines that honour the estate's rich heritage while pushing the boundaries of modern winemaking.

### **CRAFTING AN AWARD-WINNING CABERNET SAUVIGNON**

The 2024 Diners Club Young Winemaker of the Year award recognised Mika for her 2022 Estate Range Cabernet Sauvignon, a wine that exemplifies her meticulous approach to winemaking. The grapes for this wine were harvested from a west-facing block planted in 2011, situated 140 metres above sea level. The soil—a combination of decomposed granite and Table Mountain sandstone—and the block's proximity to the ocean contribute to the wine's exceptional terroir expression.

After being harvested at 25 Baling, the grapes underwent fermentation in a roto tank before malolactic fermentation in stainless steel tanks. The wine was then aged for 12 months in a combination of French and American oak barrels, 40% of which were new. The result is a Cabernet Sauvignon with intense concentration, vibrant fruit characteristics, and a remarkable balance between structure and elegance.

Mika describes the wine as a true reflection of its terroir. "There is a lot of hard work, passion, and attention to detail that goes into creating any wine, but Cabernet Sauvignon in Stellenbosch is a match made in heaven," she says.

### **THE JOY OF THE CRAFT**

For Mika, the most rewarding part of her role is seeing the winemaking process





through from grape to glass. “Working alongside an incredible team and knowing that the final product is enjoyed by family, friends, and fellow wine enthusiasts is incredibly fulfilling,” she says.

Her winemaking philosophy centres on collaboration and respect for nature. Neethlingshof’s sustainability initiatives, such as their owl boxes for natural pest control and the conservation of native renosterveld, resonate deeply with her. These practices enhance the quality of the wines and underscore the estate’s commitment to environmental stewardship.

#### LOOKING AHEAD

Despite her already impressive achievements, Mika remains humble and focused on the journey ahead. Her goals are simple yet profound: to continue learning, enjoy the process, and strive to produce even greater wines. This dedication to her craft ensures that she remains at the forefront of South Africa’s winemaking scene.

As the winemaker at Neethlingshof,

Mika is uniquely positioned to shape the future of an estate steeped in history while embracing innovation. Her work celebrates the delicate balance between tradition and modernity, science and art – a balance that defines her wines and her career.

Mika Engelbrecht’s rise in the wine industry is a story of talent, perseverance, and a deep respect for the craft. Her award-winning 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon is a testament to her ability to harness the unique characteristics of Stellenbosch’s terroir and translate them into wines of exceptional quality.

As she continues to push the boundaries of South African winemaking, Mika’s journey serves as an inspiration to aspiring winemakers and a reminder of the power of passion and hard work. With her vision and dedication, the future of Neethlingshof Estate – and, indeed, South African wine – looks brighter than ever. 🍷

