

Perseverance is key for Michela Dalpiaz

 By Robin Fredericks 31 Aug 2018

Meet Michela Dalpiaz, the co-founder of Ayama Wines and proud Italian co-owner of Slent Farm. Ayama is the first Vermentino wine producer to be grown and harvested in South Africa. Translated from Xhosa, Ayama means "someone to lean on". Located in the Voor-Paardeberg wine valley, this wine has introduced an array of wine varietals, including white and red vintages (Chenin Blanc, Merlot, Pinotage, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz), Leopard Spot, the Baboon's Range and Methode Cap Classique.

In celebration of #WomensMonth, we chat to Michela Dalpiaz, co-founder of Ayama Wines and proud Italian co-owner of Slent Farm, who has travelled far and wide to bring her love of wine to South Africa, with a flair of passion for the work of : that she creates...



Image via [Ayama Slent Farm](#)

▣ *What does a day in your life look like?*

I wake up very early in the morning, 4/4.30 am. After a good espresso, I start answering emails and making notes on things to be done, not planned yet. At 6am, I prepare the breakfast box for my son. I wake him up and my husband takes him to school. At 7 am, I am usually in the office, either to be in my own office for quiet work or downstairs with my "girls" working on all sort of things.

Sometimes I meet the workers at 7.30am for team building, communications – this is a short one. During the day, I attend many things, which include farming queries, orders, client requests, quotes, builders supervising, meetings with my manager and my husband (he is the agronomist), checking on work done in office, winery and outside - it's a long list! Usually, at 5/5.30pm, I go back home, for a nice glass of wine and family time – helping Alex (my son) with difficult homework if needed.

Around 9pm, I take my son to bed. We spend half an hour chatting, and then cuddling!

▣ *What made you choose a career in winemaking?*

It was a tank of Pinot Bianco, must fermenting (when I did check the tank after pressing it the day before). When I was 18, graduating from high school, I wanted to study law or economy.

My father owned a small farm and winery. The winemaker had a car accident and my father ended up alone just a few days before harvest. I offered to help him and in September 1988 my adventure started. It was exciting from the first moment - 10 people harvesting and singing in the vineyards, the noise of the scissors quickly going through the golden yellow bunches and the tractors driving to the cellar.

“ *Make your wine with passion. It is not a job, it is an art.* ”

I can still remember, the next morning, the Pinot Bianco had been pressed after chilling in a tank before fermentation. The scent of green apples was incredible and captured me immediately once the lid was opened. I can think back to that moment and imagine being there.

■ ***Do you think it's important to have a month dedicated to women? Why?***

Women win their rights fighting all over the world. We still have to face underestimation in business, but it's important to remind ourselves of the value we add to society, on all levels. Those who are stronger and luckier can be an example for those that are still having their rights violated.

■ ***The role of women in winemaking – how do you think it has shaped the industry?***

It has been shaped in terms of adding more attention to detail. A wider range of tastes, I'd say; bringing a good "push" for men to look at things differently and paying attention to how women choose to do things.

■ ***What barriers did you face, as a woman, becoming successful in your career, and how have you overcome them?***

I started when I was 18 years old in Italy and was working with a few women in the wine business. The daughter of a conservative father (he also thought that a son would have been his life gift... but he had four daughters). I had to face being underestimated and was told: "I want to speak business with your father" or "what can you possibly know about wine?"

But eventually, I made my mark and had all the men around me respect and admire me (even in opposition when I was involved in politics); through hard work, studying at night and never allowing anyone to bring me down. I wanted to know all about wine, farming and marketing. I did all sorts of jobs on the farm, from cleaning tanks to being the PR and enjoy every moment of it. No matter what you are doing, put everything you've got into it!

A worthwhile challenge I enjoy is to win admiration from a man in this business. When I moved to South Africa, I did have to face the challenge of not only being a woman but a foreigner, but I was willing to work to be seen and heard. I am happy with the respect I have gained. My best gift was a certificate from my employees on the farm, as "Mother and role model" last Christmas. I was touched by this love.



▣ ***Based on your experience, what advice would you give to women pursuing a career in winemaking?***

It is much easier now than when I started out, but never take anything for granted. Work hard. Be curious. Always look around you. Travel and bring home ideas and new challenges. Create a team around you that want to go far together.

▣ ***What is it that made you fall in love with winemaking?***

Besides the Pinot Bianco tank, I'd say the people. I love people. I love listening to different life stories and in this business you get to know so many different human beings. Being arty, I like wine because making it is a new creation every year. You can model it to your eye, sound, taste and feeling, even sound... yes, sound. Music affects wine, and I love listening music while I create wine.

▣ ***Who has been your biggest influence and/ or role model?***

I am not sure if I can name only one. I feel I am who I am because of many. My father, a few Italian colleagues, Giorgio Dalla Cia, Giulio Bertrand, Nelson Mandela... I believe in life we have different role models, we grow and we meet more people, and each one can give us a tip on how to be a better professional, but also, a better person.

▣ ***What is your message for Women's Month?***

Be strong. Be yourself. Enjoy being a woman, but never use this as a way to get somewhere. Your heart, your mind and your soul will lead you to great achievements.

▣ ***Any words of wisdom you would like to share with women in winemaking?***

Make your wine with passion. It is not a job, it is an art.

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

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