

80 years of Robertson Winery: Big brand from a small town

By Lauren Hartzenberg

30 Sep 2022

Technically, Robertson Winery is 81 years old this year. But in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, multiple alcohol sales bans and the [loss of the winery's CEO](#) Andre Engelbrecht to cancer in March 2021, a milestone birthday celebration felt ill-timed last year.



Source: Robertson Winery

Employees were grieving the loss of their leader and management was trying in earnest to keep the business afloat.

The Western Cape town of Robertson is best known for its wine, horses and roses, and Robertson Winery is the town's biggest employer. The winery provides 300 direct jobs and, by extension, 2,000 livelihoods are dependent on the company. Despite a rocky two years, the winery managed to emerge from the pandemic without a single retrenchment.

"Our hearts were broken when we lost our leader Andre to cancer at the age of 51, in the middle of all the bans. But as a team, we sat around the table and decided that we would throw everything at it. We have this massive ship that needs to keep sailing, and we need to keep going in the right direction," Robertson Winery's marketing manager Ankia Niemann said during the brand's delayed 80th birthday celebration hosted recently at Mount Nelson Hotel.

"Problem-solving became everything," she added.



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The winery now has much to celebrate in terms of recovery. Its new CEO Pieter Siebrits was appointed in November, and at the end of 2021, the winery managed to outsell its 2019 volumes, despite still grappling with reduced trading days last year.

"We learned last year what's so special about South African consumers - they go back to trusted brands, they will support you and walk with you," Niemann said.

The people's brand

Robertson Winery was founded in 1941 by 28 families, 25 of which are still involved with the business today. Established initially as a bulk wine supplier, the winery developed into a fully-fledged consumer-facing brand when it bottled its first cabernet sauvignon in 1984.

A distribution partnership struck with Vinimark in 2005 would see the Robertson Winery brand develop into a household name, as the number of cases produced grew from 300,000 to 3 million in just a few years following the agreement, Niemann explained.

Today, Robertson Winery cultivates 2,400 hectares of vine in Robertson and sells 40 million litres of product annually across 18 product ranges and 90 SKUs. "We have the most diversified brand in the country. We believe we're the people's brand. We have a product available for every consumer," Niemann said.

With more than 1,000 local wine brands present in South Africa currently, Robertson Winery is the biggest brand in terms of units sold. "To us, that translates into Robertson Winery being in more households than any other wine brand, and we are more consumed in SA than any wine brand."



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Celebratory packaging refresh

In celebration of its 80th birthday milestone, Robertson Winery has relaunched two of its most popular ranges with colourful packaging updates. The RW Natural Sweet range and RW Cultivar Light range are now both enrobed in roses, reflecting one of the admired attributes of the Robertson wine valley.

"Robertson is best known for wine, horses and roses, and it's this sentiment that inspired the rose refresh of these two much-loved ranges," Niemann said.



Refreshed packaging design. Source: Supplied

She explained during the event that the winery's marketing department had loved the idea of sleeve packaging for the refresh but wanted the sleeve to be transparent so that the actual wine could be visible. "We drink wine with *all* our senses," Niemann said.

However, the company had trouble sourcing a machine from abroad that would allow the winery to produce this packaging in-house. But a resourceful engineer at Robertson Winery took it upon himself to build such a machine from scratch.

For the creative design, the brand commissioned artist Riaan Marais to recreate specific varieties of roses found in the Robertson valley, including Fairest Cape, Brumilda Roos and Just Joey, to be used on the new packaging.

Robertson Winery was a pioneer in light cultivar wines, launching its first range in 2008. The initial range featured a Sauvignon Blanc Extra Light, Chenin Blanc Light and Pinotage Rosé Light. This popular range was extended when an Extra Light Merlot was added to the collection in 2011.

According to Niemann, the brand's birthday celebration is all about paying homage to the valley from which Robertson Winery originates. "We wanted to celebrate this proud milestone by breathing life, colour and fun into some of our most loved ranges," she said.

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