

South African and German Wine Legends Join Forces to Create a Riesling that's Staying Alive

Two renowned family wineries from Stellenbosch in South Africa and Germany's Pfalz region have teamed-up in a unique collaboration to produce a Riesling wine underscoring both families' commitment to the Riesling variety and the importance of family-owned wine farms.

Staying Alive Riesling is a collaboration between pioneering Stellenbosch estate Delheim and Wine Estate Hammel situated in Kirchbaum, this wine cementing a relationship between the Sperling family from Delheim and the Hammels who have been making wine in Kirchbaum since 1723.

The wine is the culmination of a four-decade friendship between Christoph Hammel, the ninth-generation winemaker at Wine Estate Hammel, and the Sperlings of Delheim, where Christoph cut his winemaking teeth under Delheim patriarch Spatz Sperling in the 1980s.

Nora Sperling Thiel, co-owner and director of Delheim, says the collaboration with Christoph Hammel is the culmination of a 40-year relationship and friendship between two families entrenched in the wine worlds of South Africa and Germany.

"Since Christoph worked under my father at Delheim, the two families have stayed in touch, closely following each other's paths in the wine world, exchanging ideas and sharing their respective vision for the ever-changing wine markets," she says. "Having a Riesling vineyard on our farm, and myself and my brother Victor considering making a wine from it, we brought Christoph into the discussion. And between the two families decided to aim for something original, namely a Riesling which is made from Delheim's vineyard but with Christoph's involvement in every step of the way."

A unique collaboration called for a unique, stand-alone brand, hence the wine acquiring the name Staying Alive with a colourful, retro label as a joint product of Delheim and Hammel.

Christoph Hammel says that as a winemaker always looking for original and challenging opportunities, the Staying Alive partnership with Delheim has been an inspirational project to work on.

"My tenure at Delheim in the 1980s under Spatz Sperling, when I came to Stellenbosch as a raw young German winemaker to experience the culture of South African wine under Spatz's knowledge and spirited personality, had a marked influence on forming my winemaking philosophy," he says. "To now get the opportunity of joining Spatz's kids Nora and Victor in this collaboration was nostalgic, inspirational and – above all – a lot of fun."

The maiden Staying Alive Riesling 2022 was made from a vineyard planted on Delheim in 2007 at an elevation of between 320m and 340m.

Delheim winemaker Roelof Lotriet, who partnered with Christoph in making the Staying Alive, says both parties agreed that the idea was to make a Riesling in a style termed in Germany as "non-traditional", implying more fruit in the wine and lesser reliance on the terpene character associated with many traditional versions of wines made from this variety.

"After picking, destemming and crushing, the juice was given 24hr skin contact before pressing," says Lotriet. "The juice was then stabilised and kept at 2°C before being placed in concrete egg tanks and new 500l French oak and acacia wood barrels. To kick-start the fermentation we used a yeast 1895C which was isolated from wine residue left over from a bottle of Swiss wine made in 1895 that was discovered in 2008. After fermentation, the wine was kept for six months on the lees before bottling."

The result, says Roelof and Christoph, is a precise, clean and focussed rendition of the Riesling variety, a cultivar known to accurately express its sense of place.

Christoph says the final wine once again confirms the incredibly diverse terroir of Stellenbosch's Simonsberg region and its suitability to growing a wide range of cultivars expressing regional identity and embodying exceptional quality.

"The quality we have achieved with the Staying Alive Riesling is an example of this," says Christoph, "and it has been an exceptional experience being a part of this wine together with the physical features of Delheim's terroir as well as with the Sperling family and Roelof and his winemaking team."

Victor Sperling, co-owner and director of Delheim, says the irreverent name Staying Alive is relevant in many ways. "Together with Christoph, we believe Riesling is one of the world's great white varieties, and although plantings have declined in South Africa with only a handful of producers making wine from this cultivar, Riesling's ability to make great wines shows the variety is still definitely alive and kicking," says Victor. "With the Hammels making wine for nine generations, and Delheim now in our third generation, Staying Alive also underscores the longevity and the important role of family-owned wineries throughout the wine world."

As far as the irreverent retro label of this wine is concerned, Christoph admits to being the one driving the creative direction. "In Germany, retro is currently in big fashion, and this was part of the inspiration for the label," he says. "It also underscores the fact that Delheim and Hammel might have been around for a long time, but we are still very much a part of the exciting developments in the wine world and for sure are not going anywhere! Staying Alive... and kicking... and continuing our lifelong odyssey to create quality, inspiring wines. Because this is our lives, and we are staying with it."