



# BELLE ÉPOQUE

by Suzy Bell

## Northern borders

A Zimbabwean cellar-hand-turned-sommelier has found his sweetspot in Claremont.

The sommelier pours me a glass of Topaz Pinot Noir 2007 and the label shouts "100%" as if our very lives depend on it. Later, we discover it actually does.

I'm sitting with Zimbabwean sommelier Gregory Mutambe on the sunny verandah of the Vineyard Hotel & Spa in cushy Claremont. "I like this Topaz, it's earthy, quite complex, Old World style, and you can have it with pork or fish; fresh tuna would be good," suggests Gregory. And I'm thinking, "Yes," with Charles Bukowski whispering in my ear: "Love is a beer cap stepped on while on the way to the bathroom, love is the lost key to your door when you're drunk..."

"I'm into wine because of Pinot Noir," says Gregory. He likes that one doesn't rush when drinking Pinot. I notice rather sheepishly that my glass is nearly drained while his is half full. It's just so damn good, infinitely gluggable and multi-layered, like Miles Davis. "For me it is more like Diana Krall's *Quiet Nights*," says Gregory.

Starting out as a cellar hand at 20 years of age at Mukuyu Winery outside Harare, Gregory says back then he always began with Pinot Noir at his tastings. "Even my online chess password is Pinot Noir," he laughs at himself.

"And I didn't leave Zim because of

Mugabe, but because of ambition." Understandably, as there are only two wine producers in Zimbabwe, Mukuyu and Stapleford. "Zim wine has won some awards... back in 1995, I think. You'll have to check." I hate it when people say that. I nod and lie through my teeth saying I will, when I absolutely will not. I'd rather spend my time listening to Cape Town jazz legend Hilton Schilder playing piano at Swingers or be tucked up in bed with a glass of Dieu Donné Cab Sav 2003 reading *Bitterkomix*.

### "I'm into wine because of Pinot Noir..."

Gregory says that what he prefers about wine as opposed to whisky and beer is that with wine he doesn't get intoxicated. "I like it that with good wine such as this you are still able to read and do your work." I'm thinking I like it that right now my brain is melting into my throat and I feel so fantastically high. Even the guinea fowls are transforming into peacocks.

We are meant to do a tasting, but once we tasted two other wines, which were such a crushing disappointment, it felt like we'd moved from being high on Miles Davis to crashing into the gutter with Britney Spears. Gregory was more polite: "A young vine, potential in growth, they'll produce better fruit..."

We return most gratefully to the Topaz Pinot.

When I ask Gregory which local wines he personally enjoys, he is suddenly a bit coy. "I'm a little bit biased as we have wine partners from Warwick to Waterford." But, after I threaten to pull out his toenails in front of wealthy foreign guests, he finally relents that he highly recommends the Bouchard Finlayson Galpin Peak Pinot Noir 2009. In fact, he has taken a stash home to add to his growing wine collection in Zim. He also

rates the Paul Cluver Seven Flags Pinot Noir 2006 which I still haven't had the pleasure to taste, but Christian Eedes (WINE's tasting panel chairman) rants that "for sheer sexiness, it leads the field by a distance greater than the proverbial country mile".

Gregory runs Monday-night tastings aside from his popular twice-monthly gourmet wine dinners. I think I'll pop in with some unruly mates on a Monday night and cause some trouble! ■

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