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## **The man who shattered South Africa's wine-glass ceiling...**

... but Tariro Masayiti is a rare success story in an industry still dominated by the white minority

By Daniel Howden

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Tariro Masayiti was the only black face in his class when he started his winemaking course at Stellenbosch University

As a young boy, Tariro Masayiti and his brother would sneak into a neighbouring farm in eastern Zimbabwe to steal grapes from the vine. "I think we knew they were grown to make wine but we didn't know anyone who drank wine," he remembers. "We knew that it was a special drink but it wasn't something for us. We just wanted to help ourselves to a bunch of grapes." The Shona boy, whose name means "hope", had no idea how those vines would shape the rest of his life. The farm next door happened to be Mukuyu, one of only a handful of small wineries in the country. Naturally gifted at maths and the beneficiary of the hopeful early expansion of education in post-independence Zimbabwe, Tariro did well enough at school to land a place at university in Harare studying bio-chemistry.

It seemed obvious to him, he says, to help out at the winery's laboratory in return for pocket money back at the farm during his vacations..

Today, the boy called hope is a respected senior winemaker with South Africa's largest producer Nederburg. His working day is spent among the immaculate vineyards that stretch across the plateau of Paarl ringed by the mountains of the Western Cape. He oversees a large staff and cellars which produce 12 million litres of wine every year. Two of Masayiti's wines, a white and a rosé, were chosen by football's world governing body Fifa as official World Cup wines. Masayiti's success in an industry, which thanks to its European roots and relationship to toxic past politics of labour and land is often used to gauge progress in South Africa, is giving him an increasingly high profile in his adopted country.

Whatever its colour, wine in South Africa is still white. Despite attempts at land reform, government efforts and subsidies, there are only a handful of black winemakers in an industry that employs tens of thousands and exports 400 million litres per year. Past efforts at reversing centuries of gross inequality through land reform have offered incremental progress at best.

Ventures such as the New Beginnings label in the Boland region of Western Cape where a Cape Town lawyer, Alan Nelson, gave 11 hectares of his wine estate Nelson's Creek to members of his black workforce have flourished. The world's first wine to be grown, produced, tasted and marketed

entirely by black people was a marketing success but a business failure. After six years of scratching a meagre living the plot was judged not to be commercially viable.

It has since become a byword for the frustrating failures in achieving the government goal of putting 30 per cent of South Africa's land into the hands of the black majority.

Masayiti's story suggests a different path to a more open wine industry. In his case it was one with a distinctly international flavour. The Zimbabwean pioneer in South African wine owes his career to a New Zealander who befriended him at Mukuyu. Brent King, who had been hired as a vintner by the winery near Marondera, took a shine to the lab assistant and got him to try drinking the stuff he was helping to make. His first sip came at the age of 24. It was a sauvignon blanc, he remembers. "For someone who had never had a drink of alcohol it was ugly, it was horrible. I accepted it as work – the idea of drinking it and getting something out of it was completely new." He persevered. The Kiwi winemaker and his apprentice would sit up into the night trying different varieties.

"I got interested in how he did his work and described wine. I thought this was something special."

The wine label decided to invest in their local find and Masayiti got a place on a winemaking course at the prestigious Stellenbosch University in neighbouring South Africa.

Once there the newcomer encountered an entirely new set of challenges. "It was the first time I saw so many villas and vineyards, it was a whole world of wine." The biggest problem was that his course was taught only in Afrikaans, a language he did not speak. "No one around me looked like me. I was sitting there with no idea what the teacher was talking about." The university tried to help with Afrikaans lessons and he was transferred to the English speaking forestry course to do science modules. After two years he rejoined the winemakers, having had a chance to adjust. Still very poor at Afrikaans, "I managed to find a way to teach myself, looking at pictures, taking a lot of notes and getting a hint of what's going on and talking afterwards to the teacher".

In his third year he was no longer the only black face in a class still dominated by the Afrikaaner children of winemaking families from the Western Cape. His friendships with the black South African students gave him an insight into the struggle they faced breaking into the wine industry. They were all from KwaZulu Natal, which offered bursaries to black students wanting to study wine. But the poor standard of education there meant the KZN students were leagues behind their white counterparts on arrival. "Every day for them was a struggle which made them feel inferior." His black classmates had never conducted practical experiments as their schools hadn't had labs or equipment.

He remembers the travails of Ntsiki Biyela, now a close friend. "It was the first time she had ever seen a beaker. You can imagine yourself seeing a Bunsen burner and a beaker for the first time. The most normal thing for most of the students was completely new to her." With the confidence he had gained from his degree and his time at Mukuyu – and removed from the poisonous racial politics of apartheid – Masayiti was able to help his fellow students. Biyela went on to become South Africa's first black woman winemaker, working for a boutique winery near Stellenbosch. "She grew up in the worst background. She would have been expected to be a house maid at best. "Once you get that opportunity you can't let it go. She took that opportunity all the way." He believes that other provinces should follow the lead of KZN and set up bursaries.

Before graduating from Stellenbosch, Masayiti's talent was recognised and he was offered a job as one of the assistant winemakers at Fleur du Cap. After three years there he decided to apply for an opening as senior winemaker at South Africa's biggest and most technically advanced winery, Nederburg. After beating a field of competitors for the prestigious job he found his assistant was an

Afrikaaner classmate from Stellenbosch. He credits the generosity of his assistant with making his early period at the winery a success.

Wandering among the beautifully preserved Cape Dutch facades of the Nederburg estate, Masayiti's is a rare black face in an overwhelmingly white world. Wealthy tourists travelling the wine route crunch the gravel in the driveway in their luxury cars, logs crackle in fireplaces and the air that's breathed feels affluent. He is often referred to jokingly by colleagues as the "black white winemaker" as he oversees all of Nederburg's whites and rosé wine. He admits that the joke can wear thin and remembers going to buy his first car at a local dealership. "The dealer asked me what I did for a living so I showed him my payslip. It said white winemaker. "He said 'but you're not white'. I said, 'no' but the wine is'."

In a country which celebrates its winemakers, the 37-year-old is on his way to becoming a celebrity. The Department of Agriculture flies him to Johannesburg once a year to mentor outstanding young black students and he is still involved with Stellenbosch University where he looks out for young would-be winemakers. At Nederburg he takes two black students on work experience each term. "I'm the black face of the wine industry," he says without conceit or frustration. "A guy who didn't know anything about wine and gets to Nederburg, the biggest wine company in the country."

He has been approached by a number of businessmen seeking to exploit the empowerment programmes by setting up black-owned wine labels. They want to use subsidies to buy bulk wine and then blend it for marketing under their own label, he says. "I don't blame them but I don't get involved," he says. "I want to make wine that people can take seriously." And he has. The "Ingenuity" white that blends eight varieties that he pioneered at Nederburg was the first wine from their stable since the 1970s to get a five-star rating from South Africa's top wine guide.

Bursaries, fair trade schemes and shares given by wineries to their black workforce are slowly changing the subtle segregation that spoiled South Africa's wine industry, Masayiti believes, but it is only the beginning. "Sometimes at these wine functions in Western Cape I look around and I realise I am the only black face among hundreds of people. I think to myself, how is this possible?"