

MEDIA RELEASE

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WEST COAST WINE GIANT BLAZES TECHNOLOGY TRAIL

WestCorp International is conducting revolutionary research into the “DNA” of grapes and wine and pioneers high-tech quality control in vineyard and cellar. Today, the cellar is at the forefront of international quality and safety systems.

WestCorp International, one of South Africa's largest wine exporters, is conducting its groundbreaking research into the “DNA” or chemical “fingerprints” of grapes and wine in collaboration with the University of Stellenbosch.

Until recently the standard wine cellar’s quality control started with the receipt of newly harvested grapes and the customary analysis of fruit sugar, acidity and pH. These three chemical criteria were accepted as the only or most important determinants of wine quality. However, Marinda Swanepoel, quality control manager at WestCorp International, points out that the measuring of the sugar and acid contents and the pH of grapes is not sufficient for an industry intent on producing specialized quality products. “Wine quality includes many more aspects and we also need to be able to predict wine quality based on thorough chemical analyses in the vineyard itself. The health of a vineyard and of the grapes it ultimately produces, are of the utmost importance in producing quality wines.”

Working in conjunction with the Institute for Wine Biotechnology* and the department of viticulture and oenology at the University of Stellenbosch, Swanepoel and her team have found several groups of chemical compounds, which interpreted together, will reveal the “fingerprints” of grapes, thereby enabling the winemaking team to take advance quality control steps in the cellar.

The implications of chemically unhealthy and/or unbalanced grapes are far-reaching, as they often result in wines of lower quality due to oxidation, weak colour concentration and loss of flavour. Proper identification of problematic chemical compositions could also rule out potential difficulties in the cellar during fermentation and filtration.

Swanepoel’s research also highlights the importance of efficient management of logistics during the harvesting and transportation of grapes to the cellar: “The distance between a vineyard and a cellar and

the time it takes for the harvested fruit to reach the cellar in summer temperatures are critical quality criteria and should be an integral part of a winery's QC strategy," cautions Swanepoel.

For this reason WestCorp International recently acquired state-of-the-art infrared technology from FOSS, a Danish Company, called Winescan and Grapescan FT120. The new equipment enables WestCorp's QC staff to measure 21 chemical components in grapes in just 30 seconds and to gauge the quality of a particular vintage during the grapes' ripening phase, well before the actual harvest gets under way.

Grapescan FT120 enables WestCorp International to differentiate between grape growers, as the method identifies those growers that have tended their vineyards with particular agricultural and viticultural prowess.

"As one of South Africa's foremost exporters, it is of critical importance that WestCorp's production processes also allow us competitive advantages in the international marketplace," says marketing manager, Fanie Augustyn.

In recent years, WestCorp International has led the way in international standards and quality and safety systems. In 2003 the company became the first South African business to be subjected to the following three assessments and to achieve simultaneous accreditation for all of them

- ISO 9001; 2000 Quality Management Systems
- SANS 10330 – HACCP (an international food hazards standard, previously SABS 0330)
- BRC – a technical standard for suppliers of retailer branded food products in Britain

In terms of HACCP accreditation, all of WestCorp's suppliers were scrutinized and introduced to a standardised quality control system incorporating all aspects of food safety, quality and environmental impact. HACCP accreditation facilitates complete traceability of all raw materials, including packaging, through all production processes and right through to the consumer.

Each of these accreditations requires twice yearly surveillance audits to ensure that standards are maintained and continuously improved.

"These quality and safety accreditations are marketing tools and sales mechanisms in an increasingly competitive international market for wine," says Augustyn. "It allows for absolute traceability from the soil in which the vines grow all the way through the supply chain to the consumer's table."

* WestCorp International is an official research partner of the University of Stellenbosch and its Institute for Wine Biotechnology. Two research studies funded by Winetech are currently being conducted in conjunction with WestCorp, namely

1. *Micro-oxygenation, enzyme and tannin addition to red wine and the impact thereof on colour optimisation; and*
2. *Optimal ripeness and a ripening profile for wine grapes* with drs Maret du Toit and Helene Niewoudt.

ENDS

Note to editors

WestCorp International came into existence with the amalgamation of the Vredendal and Spruitdrift wineries in 2002 and is one of the largest wine cooperative in the Southern Hemisphere. The company owns among others the hugely successful export brands, Gôiya and Namaqua. WestCorp International produces 15% of all South African wine exported to the United Kingdom.

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