Carla Hüsselmann joins a few of Mzansi’s finest winemakers in their quest for the perfect barrel.
We’d get these endless invitations to golf days hosted by these big supply companies, but we just don’t play golf.

-Miles Mossop

It’s been a rough week again, juggling the constant demands of two award-winning wineries. Today isn’t looking any kinder: a morning of high-drama with huge take-offs on thick-lipped 10-foot waves, epic long rides and spectacular wipeouts has seen many a board, leash and fin sacrificed to capricious Mother Nature. Some of the contestants are already deep into their second bottle of wine, possibly to soothe their battered egos and warm their freezing limbs, but probably because it would be out of place if they weren’t.

As the drizzle intensifies and Miles Mossop launches himself off Stilbaai’s point into the surging ocean, everything but the moment he’s caught in melts away. It has to – it’s about survival now, as he paddles over the heaving swell and the razor-sharp rocks below.

At first he battles to find his breath, but then settles into a familiar rhythm as he fights his way through the strong rip current that’s already swept unlucky contestants from the point all the way down to the lighthouse. His lungs almost burst as he duck dives expertly under the hairy waves, but then he’s through, saltwater burning his eyes as he heads for the backline.

He knows today isn’t about pulling off any fancy moves – he just needs to make two waves and he’ll be in contention to win the fondly-named ‘Ballies’ division. As he charges the take-off and makes the section, Mossop feels alive – truly alive – and yells with pure joy as he heads back towards the shore, sated.

The annual Vintners’ Surf Classic is arguably the coolest surf contest in the country – one that’s not about winners or losers, but a good-natured, bonding battle over breakers and barrels. This unique weekend of Boland-style revelry sees a large contingent of SA’s most
by these big supply companies, but we just don't play golf,' he says from his office perched on the slopes of Helshoogte, outside Stellenbosch. 'So we started our own surf day: the first Vintners' in 2000 saw only 12 of us compete and it's grown to 70-odd contestants, including sponsor competitors. It's a friendly competition that's about having fun and raising money for the Surf4Life charity, which helps get kids off the street and into the ocean.'

He took up surfing when he was 11 with the five Schultz brothers – three of whom are also winemakers, Gunter at Kleinood, Rudi at Thelema and Carl at Hartenberg – and he admits it defines him more than anything else does. 'As Eben Sadie [of Sadie Family Wines] often says: We were all first surfers before we became winemakers. He also likes saying that we were surfers before we were husbands and fathers,' Mossop says with a laugh. 'Surfing is foremost in our minds at all times. What's better than sitting in the

\[\text{Barrels and Breaks\ Travel}\]

\textbf{Miles's Ultimate Family Surf Fix}

St Francis Bay lies between Tsitsikamma and Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, and it's a favourite of winemaker and family man, Miles Mossop. 'My whole family surfs, including my wife Samantha and my kids, Saskia-Jo, Maximilian and Kika, so every year we take two weeks to stay on the break at the beautiful St Francis,' says Miles. St Francis Bay is built around an extensive 7km marina and canal system and is filled with attractive whitewashed thatched homes perfect for family escapes. Its spectacular breaks include Bruce's Beauties and Seal Point. 'We surf every single day,' adds Miles, with glee. 'Sometimes three times in one day.'

\textbf{Blue Crush}

The self-titled 'vintner surfers' take their playtime very seriously – it's why they refused to waste it playing golf and instead created the Vintners' Surf Classic, says Mossop, winemaker at Miles Mossop Wines and Tokara. 'We'd get these endless invitations to golf days hosted...
ocean, bobbing around, feeling the cold water, the sand between your toes before you paddle out? It’s a complete oneness with nature, just like winemaking is. It helps me forget about everything and focuses me in the moment. Every single wave is different – you’re constantly learning, improving and changing. I’m 45 and I’m surfing better than I’ve ever surfed.

A provincial surfer and the youngest of the Schultz brothers, Gunter recalls once being asked at a job interview with a winery whether he’d choose to surf professionally or make wine. ‘Duh, obviously I answered: “surf professionally!”’ Thankfully they still gave me the job. I love making wine but surfing is my first love,’ he says, adding that he’s aiming to bunk out for a surf later in the week. ‘Every single foreign harvest job I ever did revolved around the fact that there’d be a cooking surf spot within a 40km radius. Australia, New Zealand and California all have great surf and great vineyards near them – I’ve been lucky to visit them all.’

For Gunter, surfing is about connecting with nature and reconnecting with himself. ‘Surfing has taught me respect, particularly as I was a cheeky teen when I started. That got sorted out very quickly in the ocean. I’ve learnt that no matter who you are there’s always someone bigger than you who’ll put you in your place.’

Nadia Barnard, winemaker at Waterkloof in Somerset West, swapped her mountain bike for a surfboard last year. ‘Surfing is so humbling – you realise just how small you are. It’s very hard work, but that amazing feeling when you actually catch a wave is so worth it. It teaches you that if you work hard and persevere, the rewards are exceptional. When I get out of the ocean after a surf, I feel completely cleansed.’

For Johan ‘Vine Hugger’ Reyneke, the owner and viticulturist of Reyneke Wines, surfing is more than a sport, as it offers both physical and spiritual benefits, which he reaps at least three times a week. ‘Surfing has a special word for it: stoke – it’s a combination of happiness and contentment. When you’re out there, you know it’s as good as being alive gets,’ he says. This holistic approach is imbued in his organic wine: his 40-year-old vines produce...
grapes for what became the first biodynamic winery in SA in 2004. It’s still among the very few engaged in biodynamic farming – Waterkloof is another – and has achieved a John Platter 5-Star Winery rating. ‘For me, there’s more to life and winemaking than science – there’s a spiritual element,’ says the soul surfer/winemaker. ‘You’re inviting that spirit to heal your land and be part of your farm. I didn’t really choose wine or surfing – they kind of chose me. I’ve learnt that you can surf with the wave, rather than against it. With my winemaking, what you find in our wine is an expression of our farm. That’s all there is in our wine: it’s these grapes and time. No yeast, no tricks… It’s just love, passion, nature, happiness that comes together in a beautiful glass of wine.’ And it’s these four ingredients that Reyneke channels when chasing those other barrels, the perfect peeling waves that surfers’ fantasies are made of.

A WILD CHEMISTRY

The surfer vintners are used to Mother Nature throwing her best and worst at them – and they’ve learned to be resilient and humble in the wake of her wishes. ‘Surfing definitely makes winemakers more attuned to nature,’ says Bevan Newton Johnson, marketing director of Newton Johnson Family Vineyards in the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, near Hermanus. His younger brother Gordon is the winery’s winemaker – both are avid surfers. ‘You learn that you can’t dictate to the ocean, which is similar to wine-making – you’re in control as much as the vintage allows you to be in control.’

Winemaking and surfing have honed Mossop’s instincts for dealing with the subtleties of change. ‘When it comes to winemaking, just like waves, your environment is ever-changing; every vintage is different,’ he says. ‘You’re learning different personalities and constantly having to adjust to the conditions, what the weather is doing, what the grapes have done, what the wine is doing in the barrel. We don’t actually understand everything that goes on in a wine. We know a lot about chemistry but every batch is different, every variety is different and every vineyard is different, and it changes all the time. Like winemaking, surfing is creative – you’re adjusting to the conditions and trying to make the best of them. You learn to be resilient and patient.’

For Gunter, both are art forms and surfing brings calmness and relaxation to the intensity of his winemaking. And of course, when winemaking and waves meet at annual events like the Vintners’ Classic, it further boosts the camaraderie that exists between the Cape’s vintner surfers. ‘A rising tide lifts all boats: if your competitor does well, it’s fantastic for brand South Africa,’ says Reyneke. ‘That’s the way we surf, that’s the way we make wine.’