

Former farm worker rises to executive role at Zoetendal Vineyards and River Estate

 By [Robin Fredericks](#)

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Denzel Swarts, who was born into a farm-working family on the Simonsig Wine Estate in Stellenbosch 37 years ago, has been appointed the new sales and brand executive at Zoetendal Vineyards and River Estate.



Denzel Swarts, sales and brand executive at Zoetendal Vineyards and River Estate.

Zoetendal is situated near Elim in the Overberg region of the Western Cape.

Swarts is the third generation of his family to work in the Simonsig vineyards. He started as a part-time general worker at the age of 16, working on weekends and school holidays. When he turned 20, he was offered a full-time job and after 13 years of hard work, he was promoted to the position of regional brand ambassador for the Western and Eastern Cape provinces.

According to Swarts, he was fortunate to have access to career development opportunities at Simonsig, which allowed him to work closely with winemakers Johan and Michael Malan and gain valuable experience.

Swarts has completed various courses with the Cape Wine Academy through Stellenbosch University as part of his ongoing professional development journey over the past 11 years at Simonsig. However, what he found most memorable was his time at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business (GSB), where he successfully finished The Business of Wine course. He has since completed a post-graduate diploma in administration through the GSB.

Swarts is also an executive member of BLACC (the Black Cellar Club), an association for individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in Southern Africa and beyond, who are interested in advancing their wine knowledge for career benefits.

In 2016, Swarts founded Son of the Soil, a non-profit wine business. The programme is designed for rural youth in the

Western Cape and aims to inspire them to become responsible and active citizens of South Africa.

We caught up with Swarts to find out more about his new role.

❏ ***Can you tell us a little about your background and how you got into the wine industry?***

As a young child growing up on a wine farm, where my grandfather and parents were labourers, I was introduced quite early to the beauty of nature and farming. I always wanted to become a viticulturist, but my parents could not afford me to go that route due to funding constraints.

I later, through short courses, built up my skill set and experience in the industry and started cementing my influence and role.

❏ ***What does your role as sales and brand executive at Zoetendal Vineyards entail?***

It's a bit of a broad scope.

1. Sales and marketing of the brand
2. Listing the wines in stores (off consumption) and restaurants (on consumption)
3. Managing client relationships
4. Exports
5. Managing the image of the brand in the public domain.
6. Ensuring that the brand strategically aligns with like-minded establishments
7. Grow sales
8. Managing the vineyards and winemaking

These are some of the roles in need to fulfil.

❏ ***What do you hope to achieve in your new role? What is first on your agenda?***

Establishing the brand as a premium/ luxury wine brand. Understanding the culture of the business and starting to increase the visibility of the brand.

❏ ***How do you think your background will influence your approach to your new role?***

Without my background, I would not have acquired the necessary skill set and experience. The values I hold dear will be a critical part/ tool of obtaining success within my new role.

❏ ***What have been the highlights of your career so far?***

- Changing the narrative of a farm child and the typical stigma that comes with it.
- Obtaining my Business of Wine Certificate at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business and later graduating with a PGDip in Business Administration.
- Receiving an International Scholarship with the Gerrard Basset Foundation.
- Establishment of my leadership foundation - [Son of the Soil Leadership Foundation](#)

❏ ***What would you say have been the challenges?***

Having to work 10x harder than your white colleagues to earn the necessary respect for your craft.

❏ ***What advice would you give to young people who are interested in pursuing a career in the wine industry?***



You must love and have a passion for this industry because you not just compete against other brands and the forces of nature but also against the stigma that comes with the industry's history. If you have the above, you make sure that you equip yourself to become the best at your craft, your education can never be taken away.

Lastly, remain humble (remember it's other people's knowledge that empowers you to obtain more knowledge and therefore calls you to practise the philosophy of Ubuntu).

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

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