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A PANEL PAR EXCELLENCE

Good things come in threes according to the old adage and excitement is building up ahead of the third triennial Wines of South Africa (WOSA) Sommelier Cup finale, scheduled for 23 September in Cape Town. Finalists will be put through their paces by a judging panel of acclaimed sommeliers: Master Sommeliers James Tidwell from the US and Ronan Sayburn from the UK; Canadian Will Predhomme; South Africa-based Australian-born David Clarke and Swedish-born Joakim Hansi Blackadder AIWS; and Higgo Jacobs, Chairman of the South African Sommelier Association. Neil Grant will be the Master of Ceremonies on the night.

Beverage Manager and Master Sommelier for the Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts since 2002, James is also the co-founder of TEXSOM, the premiere professional beverage education conference in the US; producer of the TEXSOM International Wine Awards; and publisher of the magazine *Sommelier*. Here's how James sums up his chosen career: "I have such a fun job. It's a hobby, a passion and a profession at once."

Yorkshireman Ronan, a previous winner of the UK Sommelier of the Year competition, has been involved in the wine business for nearly 20 years. He currently runs his own consultancy and wine training company, The RS Wine Academy. When not immersed in wine, Ronan runs marathons and deep dives shipwrecks on England's south coast.

Will knows what it's like to be a competitor instead of a judge – he was the winner of the second WOSA Sommelier Cup held in 2013. Will, who holds an advanced certificate through the Court of Master Sommeliers (CMS), runs his own wine consultancy, Predhomme Inc. He also produces wines under the North Shore Project label in Ontario and Pearce Predhomme Wines in Oregon.

David, who was certified as a sommelier with the CMS in Australia in the mid-2000s, has worked in fine wine retail in Melbourne and London. He and his wife Jeannette (also a certified sommelier) now run Ex Animo, a Cape Town-based wine agency. David is vice-chairman for the South African Sommelier Association (SASA).

Joakim did his foundational sommelier training in Sweden where he then worked for a number of Michelin-starred restaurants. He relocated to South Africa eight years ago and worked as a sommelier at several top winelands restaurants. He also completed his Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) Diploma, joined the Commanderie de Bordeaux en Afrique du Sud as Commandeur and became inducted as a Chevalier of the Ordre des Coteaux de Champagne. A member of SASA, he is currently the Group Sommelier at the Hoghouse Brewing Company.

Higgo, who holds a law degree, relocated to the UK in 2007, where he studied with WSET and was certified with the CMS. Returning home the following year, he now consults to the industry. A founding member and current chairman for SASA, Higgo tastes for various local publications and competitions, some as chair, and is advisor to the annual Nederburg Auction. He is also a senior judge at the International Wine Challenge and Decanter.

A founding member and past chairman of SASA, accomplished sommelier and restaurateur Neil is the co-owner of Burrata, Bocca and Open Door restaurants in Cape Town. He has judged on the panels for the Bollinger Exceptional Wine Service Awards, WOSA's Sommelier World Cup and the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs Jeunes Sommeliers Competition.

A formidable line-up indeed – we cannot wait to see who makes it through the final round to be crowned WOSA Sommelier of the Year!

Lindsaye Mc Gregor