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August 10th, 2026

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Women at the Forefront of Excellence 2026 LUMO Awards Celebrate Exceptional Wine and Spirits Talent

The 2026 LUMO Awards have once again highlighted the depth of talent in South Africa's wine and spirits industry, with Izele van Blerk named Woman Winemaker of the Year and Best Still Wine of the Year, Lydia Mkwanzani taking the title of Woman Distiller of the Year, and Helena Senekal winning Best Cap Classique of the Year.

Stellenbosch, 10 August 2026 – The 2026 LUMO Awards celebrated outstanding achievement in wine and spirits at a blind tasting held at Lanzerac Hotel in Stellenbosch on Thursday, 6 August. Judged by an all-female panel of highly respected industry professionals, the Awards once again provided a rigorous platform for recognising quality, consistency and technical excellence.

The results are being announced on **National Women's Day**, observed on Monday, 10 August, giving this year's LUMO Awards particular resonance during South Africa's Women's Month. The competition recognises excellence across the wine and spirits industry while placing women's expertise and leadership firmly in the spotlight.



The panellists were:

CWM René Groenewald, CWM Catherine Dillon, CWM Jacqui Henderson, CWM Lizette Tolken, Fiona McDonald – Chair, and CWM Liezl Richards.

Izele van Blerk takes two major honours

Izele van Blerk was the outstanding performer among the winemakers, winning both **Woman Winemaker of the Year** and **Best Still Wine of the Year**.



Izele received **two Double Gold and three Gold awards**, demonstrating exceptional consistency across her entries. The Best Still Wine of the Year trophy went to **KWV The Mentors Perold 2022**, one of her Double Gold-winning wines.

At KWV, Izele works at The Mentors Cellar, where she focuses on producing multi-regional wines of the highest standard from some of South Africa's finest fruit. Her success at the 2026 LUMO Awards is a powerful reflection of both individual winemaking skill and the collaborative culture of knowledge and excellence behind The Mentors range.

Lydia Mkwanzanji named Woman Distiller of the Year

The **Woman Distiller of the Year** title was awarded to **Lydia Mkwanzanji**, who produced an exceptional performance with three Double Gold and three Gold awards.



Mkwananzi works alongside **Shanna-Rae Wilby**, founder of Time Anchor Distillery and a three-time previous winner of the Woman Distiller of the Year title. Her 2026 victory demonstrates the continuing emergence of outstanding female talent in South Africa's rapidly developing spirits sector.

Helena Senekal wins Best Cap Classique



Helena Senekal claimed the **Best Cap Classique of the Year** trophy with her **Simonsvlei Methode Cap Classique Brut Rosé**, which received a Double Gold award. Senekal is no stranger to the LUMO podium. A previous winner of both Best Cap Classique and Woman Winemaker of the Year, her latest achievement underlines the consistency and quality of her winemaking.

A strong showing

The 2026 judging panels encountered considerable diversity across the wine categories, with several varieties demonstrating the strength and versatility of South African wine.

Chenin Blanc was particularly impressive. Judge Fiona McDonald noted the breadth of styles, from rich, ripe, wooded examples to vibrant, fresh, fruity wines. At the same time, CWM Lizette Tolken highlighted the fruit, drinkability, smooth mid-palates, and integrated acidity of the strongest entries. The category produced two Double Gold-winning wines, including **Beatrix Reserve Chenin Blanc 2024** and Alvi's **Drift Signature Chenin Blanc 2026**.

In **Chardonnay**, the best wines achieved a refined balance between oak and fruit, supported by good acidity and integration. Leading the way was **Lozärn Chardonnay Sebastian 2025**.

Sauvignon Blanc similarly impressed with freshness, vibrant character and strong varietal typicity. **Contreberg Sauvignon Blanc 2025** excited panellists.



Merlot, often overshadowed by South Africa's more prominent red cultivars, was another category to attract positive attention. McDonald described the best examples as thoughtfully and sensitively produced, with succulent fruit, concentration and body without excessive oak. **Three Peaks Merlot 2025** earned Double Gold.

Cabernet Sauvignon showed strong varietal typicity, while **Shiraz** demonstrated the versatility of the cultivar in South Africa. Judge Liezl Richards noted the diversity of styles and how the South African climate expresses itself through the wines.

The **Bordeaux-style red blends** also reinforced South Africa's growing strength in the category, with the judging panel generally noting good typicity. **Cape blends** similarly showed attractive fruit character and market appeal without sacrificing complexity.

KWV The Mentors Perold 2022 literally stole the show.

The judging panel also found considerable promise in **Pinotage**, with the strongest examples displaying impressive fruit, cohesion and judicious oak use. Older vintages performed particularly well. **KWV The Mentors Pinotage 2022** was a case in point.

Boplaas Cape Vintage Reserve 2021 needs a special mention as all panellists could not help but notice the balance and structure of this wine.

Outstanding Double Gold wines

The 2026 LUMO Awards produced an impressive collection of Double Gold-winning wines:

- **Alvi's Drift Signature Chenin Blanc 2026**
- **Boplaas Cape Vintage Reserve 2021**
- **Beatrix Reserve Chenin Blanc 2024**
- **Contreberg Sauvignon Blanc 2025**
- **KWV The Mentors Perold 2022**
- **KWV The Mentors Pinotage 2022**
- **Lozärn Chardonnay Sebastian 2025**
- **Simonsvlei Methode Cap Classique Brut Rosé**
- **Three Peaks Merlot 2025**

Spirits show innovation and diversity

The spirits categories provided some of the most exciting discoveries of the 2026 competition.

The **Double Gold** winners were:

- **Karoo Still – Bitter Goed**
- **Mirari London Dry**
- **Time Anchor Barrel-Aged Rum**
- **Gincello**

Gin, in particular, offered an exciting range of styles. Judge Fiona McDonald noted the energy across both the “new style” and “other” gin categories. At the same time, CWM Jacqui Henderson singled out **Mirari London Dry** as a standout, describing it as classical and delicious.

The judges also found memorable examples among the smaller categories. A single Limoncello entry impressed with its bright, zesty character, spirit vibrancy and balanced sweetness, while the sole Bitters entry delivered remarkable complexity, with an aromatic profile incorporating star anise, cinnamon, liquorice, cumin, nutmeg and marmalade.

Celebrating the next generation of excellence

The LUMO Awards continue to provide a unique platform for recognising women who are shaping the future of the wine and spirits industry. At the same time, the quality demonstrated across the broader competition reflects the depth of expertise, innovation and craftsmanship present throughout South Africa's beverage sector.

The 2026 results demonstrate that excellence is not confined to a single style, variety or region. From Chenin Blanc and Merlot to Cap Classique, gin and emerging spirits

categories, the judging panels encountered products that combined technical precision with distinctive character.

As the LUMO Awards continued to evolve over the last eleven years, their all-female judging panel remains central to the competition's identity: bringing together respected voices from across the industry to assess wines and spirits purely on their quality, merit and performance in the glass.

The 2026 LUMO Awards once again celebrate not only outstanding products, but the people behind them—and particularly the women whose expertise, leadership and determination continue to shape the future of wine and spirits.



Visit <https://www.lumoawards.com/> for details on the 2027 LUMO Awards. The results for 2026 LUMO Awards at <https://lumoawards.com/2026-results/>. For enquiries, visit the website at <https://www.lumoawards.com/>, or email hello@lumoawards.com.

Issued by: The Awards Show (Pty) Ltd

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10 August 2026
Stellenbosch
South Africa