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Karen, you began your long and illustrious career in the drinks industry back in '93: you've been marketing manager of both Johnnie Walker and J&B; you co-founded The College of Whisky; not to mention the FNB Whisky Live Festival. What initially attracted you to the industry and what is it about it that keeps you so passionate and involved?

I fell into the industry by complete chance. My husband purchased a small piece of paradise nestled against the Stellenbosch mountains and started farming. In those days the N2 was rather notorious so commuting into Cape Town was not an option. Also the distance between the two towns in those days seemed so much farther than it is now. Remember we had separate dialling codes! I approached what was then known as Gilbeys for a job and never looked back.

What keeps me so passionate and involved? Whisky has all the right credentials. Steeped in history, a long heritage that dates back to 1494 and a subject with great depth ... as well as width. I find I am continuously learning, but probably the biggest reason has been the people. Having had the pleasure of working on two global brands, everyone I've ever met within this industry from all over the world have been enduring characters – they are colourful, fun, interesting and seem to have an addictive zest for life which is contagious. Life in this industry is never a bore.

You were born in Zim, what prompted the move to SA?

Once I'd finished school I moved to Cape Town to further my studies and never left.

So tell us about The College of Whisky and what prompted you to found it?

After making a conscious decision to leave the corporate world, I took some time out to reflect on what I was most passionate about. Every time I came back to whisky. We knew we needed to accelerate drinker knowledge and commitment to whisky, and whisky education had been identified as playing a vital role in bringing consumers not only to the brands, but also to the category. So a colleague of mine and I explored the viability of creating a whisky school which would incorporate a tasting programme, a modular whisky curriculum and a whisky shop selling both whisky and whisky paraphernalia. The numbers just didn't add up. However, not all was lost. Brandhouse saw the benefit in appointing a partner who had the whisky knowledge credentials and who was single-mindedly focused on whisky education. Some audacious goals were set, a step change made and The College of Whisky was born.

Now, before I move onto the FNB Whisky Live Festival, can you cast some light on what exactly it means to be a Keeper of the Quaich? Isn't it the world's most exclusive whisky society?

The membership of the Keepers of the Quaich is composed of men and women who have been recognised and instrumental in developing the Scotch whisky industry. Before being considered, you have had to have served a minimum of five years working on Scotch whisky. We currently have just over 1 700 members in over 70 countries and are proud to have our own active Keepers of the Quaich, International Chapter in South Africa.

And your role as Vice-Chairman of the South African Chapter – what's involved there?

Together with the Chairman, Rynard van der Westhuizen and the Honorary Secretary, Pierre Meintjes, our vision is to be recognised as the definitive, influential and authoritative Scotch whisky body in South Africa. Our goal is to provide a neutral platform to bring together those influencing and representing Scotch whisky within and outside of the whisky industry.

Okay, now that little mystery is cleared up, let's talk about the FNB Whisky Live Festival which is now in its fifth successful year. As co-founder, what were your original objectives for the festival? And now in 2007?

Our objectives set out five years ago remain. Simply to focus on the tasting, understanding, appreciation and quality of some of the world's finest whiskies by providing an accessible, affordable, interactive, experiential and educational forum. Our aim is to break down the barriers by throwing away the rule book. Who says you can't mix whisky with coke, or that it's an

old man's drink and that you must only drink whisky in a tumbler? I can assure you the distillers around the world didn't set these rules! And in doing so, we hope to unlock some of the mystery thereby exposing the fun surrounding this remarkable drink.

At the end of the day, it's all about educating and making whisky more accessible whilst spreading its universal charm. We wanted to create the ideal opportunity to understand the difference between a Scotch, Irish, Rye and Bourbon whisk(e)y; get to grips with the distilling processes; understand why the word is sometimes spelt with an 'e' or discover what whisky is your personal favourite; encourage interaction, where festival goers get to meet the people behind the brands; and the whisky representatives get to understand more about what the whisky drinkers want.

We continue to financially support the Foundation for Alcohol Related Research. The FNB Whisky Live Festival encourages people to enjoy themselves in a responsible fashion. A voucher system for whisky sampling has been implemented since year one to ensure that guests do not overindulge. Chauffeur drive services are available on request. To further support the responsible drinking initiative, once again this year a 'dedicated driver' ticket will be available for a reduced price.

So why's this festival "the biggest and the best whisky festival in the world"?

Last year we attracted over 13 000 consumers and are confident we will increase this to 15 000 this year. It's success can be credited to its reputation for innovation, style and an eclectic mix of whisky lifestyle premium products which has attracted the 25 – 45-year-old age group and the crème de la crème of whisky legends from around the world. The SA premium whisky market has shown incredible growth over the past year, with South Africa now the fifth-largest Scotch market in the world by volume. This year's show has a fantastic offering of over 180 whiskies that includes at least four new product launches which will be available for sampling for the first time.

For you personally, what is the biggest achievement of the festival so far?

There have been many but the one that probably stands out the most was transforming the industry in bringing them together as one body – for the good of the consumer — showcasing their products collectively in such a fiercely competitive market. At the end of the day, the consumer makes their choice as to which whisky/ies they choose to drink. The FNB Whisky Live Festival allows those consumers access to all these wonderful products in a non-threatening and fun environment where visitors can taste a plethora of whiskies at affordable prices. Meet the people behind the brands, share in their passion, learn from the experts and break down the perceived barriers of whisky drinking.

Getting Back to Basics is the theme for this year. What's in store? What's new?

Whisky is a drink to be discovered – its heritage, its mystery, its allure, its taste and its flavour. It is understanding and appreciating the intrinsic value of what makes whisky 'whisky'. The theme of this year's FNB Whisky Live Festival is therefore Getting Back to Basics and, in keeping with innovative and interactive styling of the show, we will be introducing a Back to Basics Zone where whisky novices/connoisseurs can get to grips, literally, with the making and flavours of whisky. Tactile – feel the barley and malted barley. Aromatic – smell the burning peat or the yeast or different types of oaks. In Johannesburg, see a cooper at work and assist in making a barrel. Taste – new make whiskies, sip a brewed beer and then taste a whisky at the end of your interactive journey. Celebrated whisky writers Dave Hughes and Dave Broom will lead short presentations throughout the evening sharing their passion for this remarkable drink.

To cater for the connoisseur another new initiative is the Lexus Connoisseur's Experience – The Ultimate Guided Tour. This is a unique personalised tour, led by a qualified whisky host. The Ultimate Guided Tour will give connoisseurs the chance to share a rare whisky or unique whisky experience with a master distiller or ambassador. Extremely limited, this will give whisky lovers a rare insight to very special whiskies, which are generally not available to the South African market.

The festival's known to attract the industry elite – from distillers, to

master blenders and global brand ambassadors. Who can we expect to see?

We have a phenomenal all star international line up this year. Just about every whisky legend in the world is coming to SA. No less than 18 master distillers/global ambassadors. The likes of Richard Paterson (Whyte & MacKay), Billy Walker (BenRiach), Ronnie Cox (The Glenrothes), Eddie Russell (Wild Turkey), Ian MacMillan (Bunnahabhain/Black Bottle) to name but a few who will be offering exclusive whisky workshops. Great personalities like French whisky and food writer, Martine Nouet will be teaming up with our own master distiller Dave Hughes to host whisky/food pairing workshops, as well as hosting the new Sensory Zone. Dave Broom will be offering a rare treat with a unique workshop of Japanese whiskies – now celebrated globally as some of the finest whiskies in the world.

And it's not just whisky at this year's festival is it?

The FNB Whisky Live Festival affords the visitor the opportunity to explore and experiment with whisky, while at the same time discovering the aspirational lifestyle associate with whisky. Like-minded luxury lifestyle products are hand selected to participate in the show. Fabiani Menswear, Tag Heuer, Tanur Jewellery and i-mate™ mobile will be displaying their goods. This year will also see the launch of the LiquidArt Gallery.

It's also about taste and flavour and the pairing of food and whisky. The Salticrux Sensory Zone has been created to allow visitors the opportunity of pairing food and whisky. Hand-selected premium products, which complement the flavour of whisky, have been invited to showcase products alongside a premium whisky.

Would you agree that there's a trend towards discovering a passion and enthusiasm for whisky?

I think we can let the numbers answer this one. With an annual whisky growth of close on 20%, and almost 30% growth in the premium sector, there's clearly something happening.

The South African whisky market is said to be worth over R2.8 billion and we're 5th in the world in terms of Scotch volume – what's behind incredible growth over the past year?

South Africa is one of the Scotch industry's fastest growing markets in the world. The growth in premium Scotch consumption has made SA one of the top three fastest-growing in the world and it is unlikely to change. It is being driven by the growing popularity amongst increasingly affluent South African consumers. The international line up of whisky presenters is testimony to the fact that the global players have recognised SA as a strong premium market and can no longer be ignored.

