

Meet the woman behind Signal Gun's craft brews

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Armed with a Viticulture and Oenology qualification from the University of Stellenbosch, Jéanri Nel was well on her way to becoming a winemaker, until she decided to indulge her love for beer and become a brewer instead.



Jéanri Nel

Nel's career in beer officially began when she applied for a position as assistant brewer at Hoogeberg Breweries, a craft brewery operated on the Durbanville Wine Valley's Signal Gun estate, traditionally known for its award-winning wines.

She worked closely alongside former brewer and Signal Gun's first winemaker MJ de Wit, before stepping into the role of head brewer. Since then, Nel has produced an impressive range of beers including Hoogeberg Ystervark Lager, Hoogeberg Lager, Hoogeberg Hefe Weiss and Hoogeberg Stout.

While the beer industry has long been male-dominated, Nel says she found it relatively easy to adjust. "I had wonderful help and support from family, friends and colleagues. Being a male or female doesn't automatically determine an industry for you, it adds to who you are and that is all you need."

"This is who I am and who I want to be, and who says women can't make damn good craft beer."



With the craft beer industry continuing to expand, more women like Nel are stepping into senior roles inside breweries, doing wonders for workforce diversity and acting as inspiring role models for aspiring brew mistresses.

In light of Women's Month, Nel shares advice on how to get a foot in the brewery door.

What inspires you, personally and professionally?

As with most things in life, in order to stand out you need to be different. I always try to do something different and/or something that people would not necessarily expect me to do, and I've always tried to go beyond what's expected of me.

Create an element of surprise. We can only achieve this if we don't get 'boxed-in' personally and professionally.

■ ***Is there a female figure that has had a particularly positive influence on your life?***

Yes, actually there are two female figures who had a positive influence in my life: both my mother and grandmother. They have given me a lot of positive and constructive criticism over the years and have always been there to pick me up when I have 'fallen'.

They have shown me that hard work will pay off in the end even though it might take a lot longer than you first envisioned. I think I would have been a completely different person if it were not for those two women in my life. In the end, you need to surround yourself with people who believe and trust in your abilities to handle life.

■ ***How can we encourage more women to consider beer brewing and winemaking as professions?***

Personally, I did not really think about winemaking and beer brewing as a profession and a possible future career for me until I went to university. These professions – especially beer brewing – are not really included in the list of mainstream careers, such as engineering, medicine, accounting, etc. which you hear about in school and at home.

The best way for anyone to consider these professions is to experience a small part of it before going off to university or college. Young women also need to know that studying Oenology does not limit you to only making wine. I studied Oenology and Viticulture and now I am a brewer.

■ ***What advice do you have for other women hoping to get into beermaking?***

Before making the decision to be a brewer, try to get hands-on experience on what the job actually entails. You can job-shadow during vacation time since beer is brewed all year long. During that time try to be like a sponge; observe and do as much as possible, take in as much information as you can and be open to doing almost anything that's asked of you.

This advice is for two main reasons. Firstly, you need to find out if the whole process – from brewing in the brewhouse through to bottling and kegging the final product – actually interests you. You may end up in a smaller brewery where you have to be able to do the whole production chain and/or oversee that it gets done correctly, or you might end up at a big brewery where you will only be part of one aspect of the production chain.

Secondly, you need to make sure that you will be physically able to do the job. Depending on where you end up and what your job description will be, you might have to pick up heavy goods and everybody will not be able/or want to do that.

Find out more about [Hoogeberg Breweries](#) and [Signal Gun estate](#) online.



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