

Not all of the upcountry wine distributors (as the country's wine producers like to think of the wholesalers who supply the inland market) have roots - or even a foot - in the wine industry. Several evolved in the space between the cellar door and the Gauteng trade. As more and more wineries launched their labels into what soon became a saturated space, the need to meet the service requirements of restaurants and bottle stores (in what is after all the largest market in the world for Cape wine) forced wineries to subcontract sales and delivery. The game has its limitations: distributors can only do a decent job if their reps don't have over-heavy portfolios. They also can't afford to become dependent on the revenues they earn from one or two key players (the bigger a brand becomes, the less it needs to surrender the distributor margin to a third party.)

Some of the mid-size wine producers chose to develop their own distribution network, and then invited a select few of their (more indirect) competitors to come on board, simply to reduce their own handling costs. This is a model which also has its limitations: if you were to be sharing truck space with a winery which actually owned the vehicle, and which urgently required additional capacity for an important delivery, you could safely predict that if something was going to be unloaded, your wines would be the first to go.

Douglas Green Bellingham (DGB), created out of the merger of several independent and spirits businesses in the 1980s, provides a distribution service for a few top-end wineries. At the company's recent trade tasting, I was able to sample wines from some of the cellars which distribute through this network. At Kanonkop I began with the two entry level wines - the Kanonkop Kadette and the Kadette Pinotage, both of which represent extraordinary value. Since they carry the full estate branding, there's little risk of a major dilution of quality, despite the sub-R90 price point. Unlike the more premium wines - which come with a serious whack of oak - they offer immediate accessibility. (Tasting the 2006 Pinotage next to 2014, you realise it will take at least 5 - 7 years for the woodiness to leave the wine). Among the cellar's three *Grands Vins* my favourite was the 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon - a wine of infinite detail and precision.

At Vergelegen there were a couple of stand out wines. The 2013 GVB has all the virtues of the finest vintages produced by Andre van Rensburg since the launch of the cellar's white Bordeaux blend almost 15 years ago. You can drink it now, but it will substantially reward a few years patience - after all, the 2012 has just won the Museum Class trophy at this year's Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show. The DNA red blend 2012, which is Cab franc-dominated, delivers the estate's hallmark finesse and intensity.

Under JD Pretorius the cellar at Steenberg has more than maintained the commitment to excellence established by John Loubser (now the group CEO). A replanting programme has seen the sauvignon blanc range much improved, with the Black Swan 2014 leesy, multi-dimensional and full. The Semillon 2014 remains very much an industry benchmark, while the Nebbiolo (also 2014) is simply extraordinary - and offers unbelievable value compared with what is being paid for often inferior wines coming from Piemonte.

The Graham Beck bubbly is always worth buying, though in the past I've had my doubts about the value of the top-of-the-range Cuvée Clive. Not this time. The latest release (2009) is superb, with intense, quite creamy textures and real baked brioche notes. Finally, The Bellingham The Bernard Chenin Blanc 2015 is a wine every chenin aficionado should track down. Intense, honeysuckle and compote aromas, tangy, not dry and certainly not sweet, full but still refined, it is a monument to the old vines from

which the fruit harvested, and to the care and attention invested in it by Niel Groenewald.