

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 10 July 2015

For all the talk about the pre-eminence of terroir there is a direct correlation between the personality of the wine producer and the style of wine which finally emerges from his cellar. Introduce a new proprietor or a new winemaker and the wine changes, notwithstanding the constancy of site. This is as true of single vineyard Burgundy as it is of recently developed estates in the Cape. The transformation may take time (in which case it is usually dramatic) or it can be visible - though nuanced - within a few vintages. It took Henri Jayer the better part of his lifetime to turn the little-regarded Cros Parantoux into one of the most sought-after wines from Vosne Romanee (an appellation generously endowed with fabulous and site-specific treasures). It took the Mentzelopoulos family only a few years of investment - coupled with the insight of employing the young Paul Pontallier as the estate *directeur* - to effect a significant turnaround at Chateau Margaux.

Carel Nel assumed control of his family's Calitzdorp estate in the 1980s and systematically managed its complete transformation. For a start, he became a high profile port producer - at the same time thrusting the little Karoo town onto centre stage as the heartland of the country's quality port industry. Simultaneously he sought out other sites for varieties which could never hope to flourish in what was clearly the Douro of the Southern Cape. His first sortie into the field was at Ruiterbos, a cool climate site not far from Mossel Bay. Today, aided by his equally adventurous daughter Margaux, the fruit sourcing extends pretty much across the whole of the Cape.

A recent tasting of current release and older wines revealed how much his thinking has changed and how far it has taken him. The port is still a key expression of his cellar - though now the port varieties are also used to make wines like Gamka (where touriga nacional predominates), Ring of Rocks (tinta barocca and touriga franca) and the Portuguese Connection (for Woolworths). This doesn't mean that he's given up on the more fashionable white cultivars - only now he's no longer trying to make his sauvignon blanc from Ruiterbos fruit: he's found a site in the Upper Langkloof which is the source of his Bobbejaanberg Reserve.

Boekenhoutkloof's Mark Kent provides another example of the importance of a visionary owner-winemaker. To even the least informed outsider the stamp of his personality is evident in all the wines made under his direction - notwithstanding price points which range from cheap-and-cheerful to unattainably expensive. Part of his skill has always been to find existing fruit sources and coax more from the grapes than anyone imagined possible. More recently however he has set off in pursuit of site - thereafter to develop the vineyards which best express it. Porseleinberg may be on the opposite end of the pricing spectrum from Porcupine Ridge Syrah, but neither would be possible without his aesthetic sense, creativity and grasp of the market. You will need deep pockets (and patience) to get the most out of the 2012 Porseleinberg, his single site Swartland shiraz. However, you could do a lot worse than drink the Porcupine Ridge (made with bought-in grapes from the same appellation) while you save up for it.

Finally, anyone who remembers how pedestrian the wines of La Motte were prior to Hein Koegelenberg taking control of the business will recognise that the role of proprietor can never be under-estimated. The resources were always there but, guided by Koegelenberg, the cellar now produces intense and focused sauvignon blanc, a pretty neat chardonnay and a couple of shiraz-based wines of which the Pierneef Shiraz-Viognier and the Hanneli R are the standout examples. The changes have taken time -

they come with carefully selected fruit sources dotted all over the Cape - but they are substantial and real. Owner-driven transformations usually are: after all, there's no satisfaction in a con job and no point in fooling yourself.