

The Constantia wine producers hit town recently, hoping no doubt to galvanise some sales interest from a retail trade shell-shocked by tanking sales and rising excise. They brought the best of their current releases, ready (presumably) to address concerns that the appellation is not living up to its potential. I was keen to attend, having trafficked in this criticism on these pages.

There were some very good wines at the otherwise very ordinary event. (You would think that producers with pretensions to being at the top of Brand South Africa's sometimes shaky flagpole would organise enough spittoons for a trade tasting, and better stemware than small size Irish coffee glasses to show their efforts off to their full potential. Perhaps they believed their wines so impressive that choice of tasting glass was irrelevant, and for the same reason they couldn't imagine anyone spitting them out.)

Among the highlights were two wines from Constantia Glen, the Sauvignon-Semillon white blend (Constantia Glen Two) and the Five (the red equivalent), a couple of the Cap Classiques (Klein Constantia and Uitsig) and the latest Steenberg Black Swan Sauvignon Blanc. I also enjoyed the Beau Constantia Cecily, which is a fine, perfumed, peachy yet restrained viognier. It did have me wondering why would you call a viognier "Cecily" (but then the other Beau Constantia wines are called "Aidan," "Pierre" and "Lucca").

While this was the only formal industry event in Johannesburg that week (hardly surprising on account of the small matter of a grape harvest which seems to be occupying the attention of the country's 3500 grape growers and 600 or so wine producers) it wasn't the only chance to taste good wine. The sommelier team at Marble in Rosebank has assembled an impressive wine list - as befits a restaurant which has captured the attention of the city's well-heeled diners. While pricing is not for the faint of heart (but at least it's consistent: liquor sales are not subsidising the teetotal diners), the service is immaculate, and the range of local and international wines is deeply impressive. The wine display, like most of Marble's décor, is striking and functional. Thus it was that I saw an unfamiliar - but really beautiful - local label on a Kaapzicht wine, and felt compelled to order a bottle.

Kaapzicht, on the Bottelary Hills of Stellenbosch, has long been a source of great reds. In the past few years there have also been some very good chenin or chenin dominated whites from the Steytler family cellar. The fruit for these wines comes from several vineyard blocks including one planted in 1947 - which makes it (apparently) the second oldest chenin vineyard in the Cape. The wine which caught my attention was the Kliprug Chenin, made from 34 year old bush vine vineyard (and thus a stripling in comparison with the 1947). Let me say that even at on-consumption prices (R400 in the restaurant, so around R150 at a wine shop) the Kliprug is a bargain, and quite extraordinary - the perfect combination of linearity, luminosity and purity, unmediated by any overt oak. While the freshness which doesn't fade, the wine evolves in the glass, developing delicate fruit nuances which unfold in layers. Anyone who knows the bold intensity of the Kaapzicht reds would not expect the lightness of hand which crafted the 2015 Kliprug.

Finally, while on the subject of restaurants, the Johannesburg dining out scene has been much improved by both Marble and by Urbanologi (situated in a craft brewery in the city.). The original chef (who has already moved on) came from an apprenticeship at the Cape Town meccas of Test Kitchen and Chef's Warehouse. However, the succession has been seamless and the offering (tapas-size portions of Asian fusion) is savoury, more-ish and an equally good match to the predominantly Waterkloof winelist and the Mad Giant

beers. Ample safe parking, polished food and wine service and real culinary excitement: it's worth dining out again in the Big Smoke.