

Preferences in wine are much more about fashion than most vintners know - or are prepared to acknowledge. There are plenty of reasons for this. If you are a producer in Burgundy, Bordeaux or Champagne - or in a part of the world whose climate and soils are best suited to the cultivars that are planted in such places - there's not a lot you can do about suddenly changing preferences. You also wouldn't like to concede that an unexpected sales boom could be the result of a trend entirely beyond your control.

In the 1980s, Chardonnay was all the rage worldwide. Then the ABC (Anything but Chardonnay) movement launched its offensive and sales plummeted. Instead a whole generation of wine drinkers focused on sauvignon blanc, convinced that the crisp acidity was a sign of sophistication ("Chardonnays are all so oaky and sweet," they said.) Growers stopped planting the great white Burgundy variety, choosing instead cultivars that tracked the fashion for unoaked whites. Before most of them realised it, there was a shortage of chardonnay fruit - the price for which (pretty much worldwide) has been increasing steadily for at least a decade. The more it costs, the more people want it - so stand by for the Chardonnay boom in the next few years.

In anticipation of this - and really because the terroir is best suited to cooler climate varieties - the Elgin producers hosted the first of what they hope will be annual Chardonnay Colloquium in early October. It was a focused event, which opened with a technical presentation by Richard Kershaw, followed by a tasting - led by an overseas speaker (Jamie Goode) - of benchmark international wines juxtaposed with a line-up of the region's best examples. There were also several breakaway events at the various properties on the second day of the symposium.

To be clear, every regional association likes to promote the appellation's point of difference. Hemel-en-Aarde has taken ownership of pinot noir, Stellenbosch (if the various wine routes there were capable of focus - which they are not) would go for cabernet. Durbanville has quietly muscled its way into the sauvignon business and Paarl has been hosting an annual shiraz competition in the off-chance that it will be able in time to claim the cultivar as its own. The difference is that Hemel-en-Aarde's and Elgin's efforts come with formal presentations aimed at persuading producers to be more focused - at the same time attracting influential consumers.

I wasn't able to attend the event, but I was lucky enough to secure a full set of the Elgin wines presented at the colloquium. These I put through a blind tasting - a process intended to give the ratings an element of objectivity, but also to see if there was any kind of pattern to the taste profile. As things turned out, there were no surprises in terms of the overall performance of the region and none at all when it came to the top scoring wines. Most of the examples hovered around the silver medal mark (80 points on my scale, 90 or so on the much devalued international scoring system now in vogue.) A full set of tasting notes, together with Richard Kershaw's technical presentation, can be found on ***** (LISA WW LINK HERE PLEASE)

The three top scoring wines were the Iona, the Richard Kershaw and the Paul Cluver. Almost all were concentrated and fine, mostly linear and not-overdone in any way. None showed an over-dependence on barrel characters, though very few had evidence of barrel work. In other words, none were funky and Burgundian. Techniques like batonnage (lees stirring) had not been allowed to interfere with the purity of the fruit. If there was a shortcoming, it was a lack of intensity: most of the wines were pretty rather than compelling. That said, they were all young - from 2015 vintage - and great chardonnay needs several years before it ascends its plinth to become an object of

adoration.