

Amongst the awards with a long and established history in the Cape wine industry, a Five Star score in the Platter Guide is probably the most coveted. In bygone days, when John Platter alone made this decision, this was simply the highest rating in the guide, his own idiosyncratic selection of the best wines of that particular year. Given that all his tastings were sighted, the five star accolade was as much a reflection of the quality the current release as it was a statement about the cellar, the site, the overall provenance of the wine.

Things have moved on since then. Even before John sold the Guide he took on a small team of tasters to assist in working through the ever-increasing number of wines which followed the post-1994 boom in Cape wine. The group contributed to this final selection - so that when the Guide became a kind of collegiate exercise there was something of a structure in place to determine which were the top performers of the vintage.

Fast forward a few more years and the Five Star tasting becomes an exercise in itself, a line-up of those wines which the individual tasters believe should receive the highest rating. These examples are submitted to the group as a whole - and for the first time they are tasted blind. The process has evolved over the years. Statisticians were called in to ensure the methodology was appropriate. The size of the panels, together with their tasting load, changed as the line-up became bigger. What used to be a manageable morning commitment for a dozen or so judges finally became a task requiring considerable logistical support.

By last year a new format was required, one involving seven panels each with three tasters and a couple of roving chairmen to resolve disagreements between the panelists. It worked well enough, arresting the ever-burgeoning numbers of five star wines and achieving its results more by way of a consensus than an arithmetical tally. Accordingly it was decided to extend the system this year for the 2016 guide and include in this tasting all wines which had been awarded 4.5 stars by the initial taster.

This is a major modification: it effectively minimises the gate-keeper role of the primary judge. No longer does the person who considers a wine worthy of 4.5 stars in a sighted tasting have the discretion to cap its upward mobility. If it's good enough to garner the next best thing to five stars, it gets to be judged blind by a three person panel and enjoys an equal chance of obtaining the ultimate accolade.

Those who have been campaigning for the Platter tasting to be conducted without the advantage (to the taster) of the label - at least as a guideline - cannot be unhappy with this decision. While prejudice (for or against) a wine can still affect its access to this forum, it's a fair assumption that most, if not all, of the serious players will be represented in a line-up which this year accounted for almost 700 wines.

Following the five star tasting which was held in late August, initial indications suggest that the merits of this approach far outweigh any disadvantages - real or imaginary. The tasting ran over two full days, with panels dealing with around 50 - 70 wines on the first day, and probably half that number on the second. Palate fatigue was therefore kept to a minimum. Panels were generally made up of specialists in that particular class, ensuring a level of coherence to which the older system could never lay claim.

Insofar as the outcome is concerned, the world will have to wait (breathlessly, of course) for the appearance of the 2016 edition in late October. Word on the street suggests that the long established cellars - those where site and pedigree are readily discernible -

have clawed back some lost ground, but whether this has been at the expense of the rockstar/fashionista/young-gun brands remains to be seen.

*Michael Fridjhon was a co-Chairman of the Platter Five Star Tasting*