

In an ideal world, price would play no part in wine preferences. You would buy and drink what you liked, without having to engage in the game of mental trade-offs. ("This is a good wine to serve after we've returned from Ellis Park and no one is really paying much attention to it" versus "this is the perfect bottle for a once-in-a-lifetime special occasion.") Reality doesn't work like that however - and even if it did, tastes are sufficiently different that many of the better wines which in today's market are relatively under-priced might still be consumed by those for whom suddenly everything in the world might be financially accessible. My Desert Island wines are not the same as yours, just as my Desert Island Books, CDs, DVDs, meals are unlikely to be the same as anyone else's. Unanimity is impossible - even a significant overlap (once you move beyond close friends and partners) seems improbable.

So, following this logic, the record of my latest round of tastings is most meaningful to me, quite useful to those in my immediate circle, and potentially pretty much useless beyond that - except we know this isn't entirely so, perhaps because price does play a part in our decision-making. I'm pretty confident that several of my bargain wines would comfortably meet the quality-value criteria of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of wine enthusiasts and vice-versa. That some of these wines are top sellers, while others only move off the shelves at the pace which Table Mountain sandstone weathers into soil is largely a matter of marketing. This is what ensures front-of-mind presence when wine drinkers go shopping, and front-of-shelf presence as they get to their wine merchant or supermarket.

So the latest vintage of Porcupine Ridge Syrah (2015) is fabulous, you'll find it easily, and selling everywhere at about R50. For very little more you might get slightly more demanding drinking pleasure from the Vondeling Merlot 2015 - the wine which has taken over from the cellar's Petite Ruche. The same kind of money would also buy you the equally elusive Altydgedacht Cabernet Sauvignon 2015, possibly the best value Cabernet in the market in the sub-R60 price range.

However, applying the logic that price should not be a material factor in the decision-making process, you could as easily seek out the 2013 Keermont Syrah, a wine made even more concentrated by the tiny harvest - the result of wind-induced crop-thinning in the spring before the vintage. It's R190 per bottle - but it does deliver appropriate polish and complexity for the price. The Spier 21 Gables Pinotage from the same vintage is in the same price range, and has the weight and intensity to back up its price positioning. If you are seeking out unusual varieties in this price range, there are a couple of wines from Idiom worth chasing down: the 2012 Zinfandel and the 2013 Viognier are both classics, the former intense and compressed, the latter showing beautiful delicacy and spice.

At roughly the same price point you can find the latest release from The Chocolate Block, consistently one of the country's top-selling ultra-premium wines. The 2015 is a 1700 barrel production and is the first vintage to be produced entirely from Swartland fruit. It's already accessible, packed with flavour, and more polished than the last few releases. Everything about it explains the broad popularity of its appeal: the tannins are soft and easy, the notes from the oak are spicy rather than woody, the aromatics are red and black fruit with no hidden complexities.

If you are looking for something completely different and you're ready to spend the same kind of money, it's worth hunting down the Pasarene Chardonnay 2014. It is tight, focused, linear, precise. The much misused word "mineral" really applies. It's on the

lean side of the spectrum but it's not thin or austere. I think it's fabulous - and it's certainly one of the best Chardonnays I've ever tasted from South African vineyards.