

Every year (since May 2002), as chairman of the Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show, I spend almost a week with some of the world's top wine judges and commentators. Several are locally based colleagues, the remainder are the international panelists who come to South Africa expressly for the competition. Once the day's work is done there's usually a dinner and an opportunity to exchange ideas. With the impression of the recent classes still fresh in mind, discussion usually begins with what seems most immediate - but in very little time it ranges ever more broadly. (By late in the evening we usually manage to solve the wine world's most serious problems. Occasionally someone the next morning remembers the solution.)

Ask any of the experts who've been part of these debates if they are useful, and the answer, almost certainly, would be "yes." If you then posed the question "have these discussions contributed to how wine is made in the place where you live and work" I would happily predict that many would also agree. This, in turn, provoked a wider, less tangible, thought - which was "how and by whom is change effected in the world of wine."

Some of the answers here are pretty self-evident: in every generation there are path-finders and game-changers. In South Africa you can pretty much track the role played by Gunter Brozel from Nederburg (1960s to 1980s) or Eben Sadie more recently. Len Evans in Australia, Hugh Johnson or Jancis Robinson in the UK (and for much of the English-speaking world), Robert Parker in America, Angelo Gaja in Piedmont or Biondi-Santi in Tuscany all pretty much bestride their age. However, there's only so much space and opportunity for the Charles Darwins and Albert Einsteins to pretty much single-handedly change the world. The transformation of the medieval to the modern, the agricultural to the industrial, the age of the wheel to the age of space exploration, is a cumulative rather than individual effort, where hot-houses (universities, technical institutes, sometimes even city states) played a disproportionately important role.

So this brings me back to the late night discussions (fuelled as much by the debates of the day as the residual alcohol lingering on the table) that take place when some of the best minds in the world of wine get together (whether in Paarl or Sydney, Santiago or San Fransisco). While we all know that wine has been made since time immemorial to provide drinking pleasure or to fulfil religious rituals, it is really only considered as an object of critical appraisal in a formal environment. Sometimes this means when wine competition panels get together, sometimes it is when collectors, enthusiasts and academics subject it to comparative analysis.

When it is well-heeled consumers who stage major wine events, there is almost always a follow-up communication. (Cynics might argue that some of the pleasure obtained from presenting a line-up of wine with a street value of millions of Rands resides in making sure that everyone knows about it). For the views of competition panels to gain wider currency, you need wine writers, critics with a public platform, but you also need producers open to the idea of critical commentary, and in a position to access these opinions. The Australian show judging system has a very public feedback environment. This involves the producers interfacing with the judges, but also, once results are announced, with consumers.

In South Africa, the critical environment was at its most vibrant in the immediate post-isolation years. Nowadays, while producers at least meet frequently and taste more broadly than they did in the past, there are very few places where diverse views are presented and debated - a function of a moribund wine press and the complacency

which comes from wider international recognition. In tough times, there's a tendency to shy away from bruising engagements - however constructive they might be. However, if our industry is to maintain its forward momentum, it needs the discomfort which comes from honest self-appraisal.