

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 13 February 2015

Addressing the VinPro open day a few weeks back, Jancis Robinson tried to give producers a sense of which varieties were currently a la mode in the U.K. Without exception these were cultivars that are not even available to adventurous growers in South Africa (when last did you find yourself asking for a bottle of Petite Arvine?) To be fair, Ms Robinson was quick to point out that no useful purpose would be served in planting them now, since they would be out of fashion by the time the vines were mature enough to be bearing grapes. In much the same spirit, Hugh Johnson noted, in a recent article, a host of (European) regional varieties which may one day cross (however briefly) the radar screens of wine drinkers with a pioneering bent. (If you're interested, look out for Amigne, Cornalin, Humagne Rouge, Savagnin, Manseng, Juhfark and Zilavka.)

Until the late 1970s Cabernet Sauvignon was the only truly sought-after cultivar in South Africa, earning for its growers a significant price premium. All other grape types were bunched together in two categories, namely those still worth mentioning by name (such as Shiraz and Pinotage) and those where it was best to conceal this information - Cinsaut, Colombard and Clairette Blanche, for example. What changed this taxonomy was the influx of international premium varieties, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and Gewurztraminer. In the early days their relative rarity provided enough cachet to reward farmers who risked cultivating them, a situation which prevailed only until plantings increased and pricing went into free-fall.

On the other, when it comes to the "unmentionable" varieties of that era, a curious inversion has occurred. Many of the vineyards have been grubbed up. Where there are still blocks of old vines, they have become objects of desire to a new generation of winemakers re-discovering pre-modern Cape wines. Nowadays you can pay R600+ for a bottle of single site Cinsaut, or for 'field blends' which include the once-excoriated Palamino.

But what of the wines now being made from cultivars which have been on the fashion merry-go-round for the past 30 or 40 years? In the early 1980s Hamilton Russell Chardonnay sold for double the price of Mouton Rothschild, while Gewurztraminer and true Riesling were vinous rarities. Over the past few days I've tasted 50 or so white wines which now trade at a significant discount but which - had they been on offer then - would comfortably have fetched as much as the country's best known Cabernets. I scored roughly half of them 80 points or more - an indication of their intrinsic quality (given that less than 10% of the wines ranked on winewizard.co.za achieve this result).

There were some very fine Sauvignon Blancs: the 2014 La Motte Pierneef, the 2014 Saronsberg, the 2014 Ernie Els and the unbelievably well-priced Simonsig Sunbird 2014. The best and highest scoring was the 2014 Diemersdal 8 Rows, consistently one of the Cape's purist and most concentrated examples. Among the more exotic cultivars the hit rate was even higher: Backsberg's Hillside Viognier delivers ample peachy notes without the oiliness to which the variety is sometimes prone. Paul Cluver's Close Encounters Riesling is simply delicious: not dry but still refreshing. Like the equally highly rated Gewurztraminer from the same cellar, it's perfect as an aperitif or to accompany spicy food.

Still, the standout wine from the week's tastings was a Gruner Veltliner - a variety that

none of us paid any attention to thirty years ago (at the time of the Austrian wine industry's "anti-freeze" scandal) but which has since become one of the most fashionable international cultivars. The Diemersdal 2014 is the first such example to be produced in South Africa and it is completely delicious. Finely managed quince, walnut and juniper aromas, perfectly balanced and savoury on the palate, persistent, refreshing and clearly ageworthy, it's a very promising addition to the wine industry's cultivar pallet.