

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 13 March 2015

The news that Kleine Zalze is now the biggest selling South African wine in the UK on-consumption trade prompted me to ponder the question of brand appeal. There appears to be an inverse relationship between the estate's show results and its image in the domestic market. Wine literate consumers who follow competition results know that Kleine Zalze has an enviable track record. Yet, despite this consistent performance over more than a decade, (Chenin Challenge winner, category trophies for Shiraz and Cabernet at what is now the Six Nations Challenge and countless other awards in-between) Kleine Zalze is not the name on the tip of punters' tongues when they look down a restaurant wine list in South Africa.

In the UK however, it has topped the on-consumption rankings on several occasions, a function as much of the inherent quality of the wines as the effort (and marketing genius) of proprietor Kobus Basson. Whereas most brand-owners invest their time in the more accessible but infinitely more fickle London market, Basson puts in the hard hours in the UK's equivalent of the Platteland. Over the years he's acquired a real following - consumers who've wrapped their Anglo-Saxon tongues around the unlikely brand name and now come to expect it on wine lists in their towns and villages.

There's no pretence at rarity or shortage, though depending on how much you want to invest in a bottle you could graduate from the Cellar Selection to the Vineyard Selection and, for special occasions, the Family Reserve. This is a form of nomenclature which creates the illusion of more, rather than less: how is the average consumer supposed to know that there are three completely different Chenin Blanc cuvées, all bearing the Kleine Zalze name and reflecting different price and quality segments? Unless the three wines are lined up alongside each other I'm guessing not even regular Kleine Zalze drinkers are aware of the separate categories.

Kleine Zalze is hardly ubiquitous in the South African trade, so consumers could be forgiven for imagining it is a relatively small brand. (It isn't, by the way - it's a remarkably successful wine business moving significant volumes). It's position is in some respects similar to Bellingham and Spier - way stronger in international markets (and more highly sought-after there) than in the home trade. In fact, the comparison with Spier is telling, for a number of reasons. Both cellars have a strong competition record, both deliver wines of quality and consistency, and both are vastly more celebrated abroad than at home.

Back to brand image: the issue cannot be pronunciation - we know Kleine Zalze thrives in the UK and even Brits with a lisp can order Bellingham. In South Africa the Zalze name doesn't pose a problem, though Bellingham battles with the burden of its now defunct Johannesburg label and Spier with the long dispute over ownership of the trade mark. All are authentic, free of controversy, credible and thoughtfully presented. When served at dinners or functions, they are all easily consumed. I've never heard a knowledgeable wine-drinker trash any of the wines.

However, what they all share in common (and this is obviously more important in the domestic than the export market) is that they lack a figurehead personality. There are winemakers (or teams of them) but there's no real face or name against which to identify them. Compare this with Adi Badenhorst or Chris Mullineux (whose brands are eponymous), or Achim von Arnim at Cabriere or Wendy Appelbaum at DeMorgenon. Who stands behind the brand at a wine show, who walks the talk in the trade?

This is not the sole preserve of a proprietor: Pieter Ferreira has been the face of Graham Beck since the first bottle of fizz went into the riddling rack, and Duncan Savage the personality of Cape Point Vineyards since the first vines flowered in Noordhoek. In a young modern industry like ours, brands need champions: the wine trade is no place for shrinking violets.