

While it's still fashionable to be rude about ordinary drinking wine, the opportunities for being genuinely critical are fewer now than ever before. Obviously there are winemakers who unthinkingly throw together the dribs and drabs of what's lying in the bottoms of their tanks. There is always material which must be disposed of with a combination of cynicism and expediency. However, the end result should be the vinous equivalent of a hearty soup recipe which clears the contents of several tupperware containers in the fridge but is considered a culinary triumph by your guests.

It's not often that you get to taste something which is unremittingly awful, the kind of wine for which the UK trade uses the acronym DNPIIM (do not put in mouth). Many years ago I attended a course on yeasts and wine faults in Bordeaux and the instructors produced a wine sample tainted with cadaverine, a biogenic amine which is, as the name suggests, associated with putrescence. To say it was unimaginably foul is to understate its lack of charm and organoleptic appeal. What was interesting, however, was that the lecturer acknowledged that it had been more than 30 years since he had seen a commercial wine displaying it (or the even more horribly named "putrescine.") Both faults were not uncommon in wines made in the first half of the 20th century. We still use terms like "ropey" but I have only once seen a "ropey wine" - the result of bacterial spoilage - where the fluid actually becomes thick and goeey and pours out in ropey globs of oily matter.

These days the best and most thoughtful winemakers tend to assemble their low price blends without dramatically dropping their standards - and without breaking the law. Winemaking is generally cleaner, and the mistakes clearly less offensive. Where there have been "technical issues" - winemaker-speak for rampant problems usually of a chemical kind - there are also now outside contractors who have equipment able to separate and eliminate the offensive component from a defective tank. In short, there's no real excuse to be selling bad wine.

Accordingly our cheap wines are - and should be - much better than they were a few decades back. Often they are less about tidying up tanks and more about the winery having something to offer in several price segments. Villiera's "Down to Earth" range retails for under R50 per bottle and delivers high quality, instantly accessible and easy to drink wines for everyday consumption. I particularly like the 2015 Sauvignon-Semillon and the 2013 Touriga Nacional - Shiraz. The same strategy underlies Vondeling's Petit Blanc and Petit Rouge, both of which land up on the shelf at the same price point and deliver a quality easily worth double that amount. While the cellar's famous Babiana is more concentrated and palpably more complex, it's also R130 per bottle at the cellar door.

The latest Paradyskloof, a three-way blend comprising the two "parents" (cinsault and pinot noir) of pinotage and the pinotage itself (a kind of hillbilly family statement) - sells for around R70 and is completely delicious. Likewise Kanonkop's Kadette delivers the cachet of the great cellar's label and the pleasure of a good everyday red for a lot less than many - more mediocre - blends. Boekenhoutskloof's Marc Kent is a master of the value wine market (as he is at the other extreme). At under R50 per bottle you could do a lot worse than buy his Wolftrap (red or white), his Porcupine Ridge 2015 Sauvignon Blanc or 2014 Cabernet. In the same spirit, Waterford's Pecan Stream brand delivers decent drinking value while at Simonsig there are wines like the Sunbird Sauvignon Blanc which are equally reliable. This is really the measure of what has changed. Cheap wine used to be plonk - faulty, contaminated, unfit for a higher purpose. Now we have smart producers, trying to sell wine in every segment of the market, and forced to over-deliver

merely to succeed.