

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 16 January 2015

During the course of next week Jancis Robinson - easily the most influential wine writer outside the USA in the English-speaking world - will be visiting the Cape winelands. An irregular visitor to this country (she has judged twice in the past decade at the Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show and has perhaps made a couple of other trips), she will have enough time on this expedition to see first-hand the transformation taking place at the quality end of the South African wine industry.

Undoubtedly the best informed wine commentator in the world, Ms. Robinson does not necessarily have to make an annual pilgrimage to the Cape to keep au fait with what is happening here. An assiduous reader served by countless correspondents and 'sources,' she is likely to know more about what is happening in any wine-producing region than the head of its generic export body.

Unsurprisingly there is an air of eager anticipation amongst the country's producers: visits as important as this are rare, and while no one seriously expects that a favourable comment from the doyenne of the wine-writing fraternity will produce quite the same result as Prince Charming's visit to Cinderella's kitchen, it's as good a reference as you can expect in the international wine game. However, the palpable excitement is tinged with a commensurate whiff of inadequacy: as if the rich cousin has accepted an invitation to join the family Christmas and suddenly no one is sure if the linen and cutlery will be good enough for the occasion.

This, sadly, has been the permanent state of mind of South Africa's wine producers since just after our emergence from the protective custody afforded by the era of isolation. Until then - unable to measure our performance in any meaningful way - we were ridiculously gung-ho. We shed that innocence when we were roundly beaten by the Australians in the 1995 SAA Shield. It seems that despite a wealth of international successes since then, we've never recovered the confidence needed to transform ourselves from colonial hicks into mainstream producers. Partly this is because it suits the international trade to continue treating us as colonial hicks, and partly because we let them define the rules in a way which keeps us in a perpetual state of hickdom.

Ms. Robinson focuses on whatever is of interest to her readers. This means that the bulk of her notes and comments relate to European - in fact mainly French - wine. Once outside the so-called Old World she devotes her energies to the United States, New Zealand and Australia. This leaves very little column space for regular assessments of Argentina, Chile, South Africa, Central Europe and the dozens of other wine producing regions of the world.

For this to change, sophisticated high-end international consumers have to come to believe that, without the right selection of South African wine, there would be a gaping void in their collections. Of course, the person to tell them this would be Ms. Robinson, and in fairness, she has been increasingly vocal about the virtues of current release cutting-edge Cape wine. (So have many of her only-slightly-less influential colleagues: changing perceptions about a nation's wine industry is not an overnight exercise.)

Wine writers alone cannot do this - especially when Wines of South Africa (directed by the major wholesalers whose levies contribute the lion's share of the funding available for export promotion) conveys another message. Many of our best wines are produced in

minuscule quantities, so there is never stock for a meaningful export effort. Burgundy, whose reputation resides mainly in the unobtainable treasures offered for review (but impossible to buy) provides a solution for this conundrum - if only we were willing to see it and act upon it. Instead however we do the opposite, promoting sound but pedestrian wines simply because they are available. It seems that, like Cinderella's sisters, we live in hope that the wrong foot will fit into the glass slipper.