

Spring brings a flood of new wines to market. It's almost as if the producers spend winter hibernating and as the weather warms they realise that their cellars are bulging under the burden of the latest vintage. Then follows a desperate and headlong hurtle to Gauteng, to show their latest treasures the largest market in the world for Cape wine. When the warm weather coincides with the launch (finally) of David Hicks's long awaited return to the Joburg culinary scene (Marble in Rosebank) the week becomes a series of *deja vu* moments.

Not all the new releases are necessarily from 2016: sauvignon blancs (inevitably) are the vanguard, but since the pipeline for longer maturing wines is linked to the same process, (but with a year or two of extra time required), it's common enough to see the best of the 2015 barrel-aged whites making their first appearance, as well as the 2014 reds. Paul Cluver opened the batting, and using Marble as the bait, achieved a pretty healthy Monday turnout of wine merchants, restaurateurs and journalists for the launch of the latest Seven Flags wines - the 2015 Chardonnay and the 2014 Pinot Noir.

The Cluver set-up is the pioneer Elgin cellar, with vineyards dating back to the late 1980s - some of which are still in production. The Seven Flags range is the property's top cuvee, and is priced accordingly (you won't get much change from R500 per bottle). The fruit has always been hand-selected from the oldest Pinot and Chardonnay blocks, and since winemaker Andries Burger has just completed his second decade in the cellar, the cumulative value of old vine fruit and row-by-row experience in the vineyards becomes something of the Seven Flags's unique selling proposition.

Unsurprisingly the Chardonnay is a *tour de force*. It's several years short of its peak, but with all the fruit weight and intensity required for the long haul, it's a wine which will repay careful cellaring. Nothing is overdone, freshness still prevails over the oak, and it has the kind of monolithic quality that tells you that unless you give it time, polish will prevail over detail. The Pinot Noir is less evidently impressive. However, given the variety, this speaks volumes about Burger's thoughtful winemaking: you cannot make pinot too big, otherwise you lose the nuance and savouriness which are its hallmark features. It has texture, intricacy and depth - without having lost that slightly evanescent quality which is what makes Pinot so elusive.

Groot Constantia was next up, a day later, same place, same time, but this time 36 invitations translated into 56 guests pitching up for the party. Of the current releases the 2015 Sauvignon Blanc was the standout wine, pungent but not sweaty, and with intense, almost plush layers of predominantly tropical fruit. Curiously the 2014 Pinotage (who, after all, thinks of Constantia as pinotage territory?) was also memorable: there were pinot notes on the nose, while subtly managed tannins give the palate a fresh savoury edge. Not big or striking, but clearly food friendly.

Straight from Marble then to 10 Bompas, for Thelema's annual range tasting, which, as always, had much that was worthy of attention: the Sutherland Pinot Noir 2013 made no pretense about taking on the best wines of the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, but it was fresh and pretty and worth its R125; so was the 2011 Cabernet-Petit Verdot, except that the prettiness did include a little thoughtful depth, made just serious enough by perfectly managed tannins. On the value side of things, the Thelema Mountain Red 2013 is a seriously good everyday wine. It served to show that the newly released 2015 Verdelho, good though it was, was optimistically priced at R140. Not so the Ed's Reserve Chardonnay 2014, compact and concentrated, but still creamy and linear: I'd trade the simple, tangy freshness of the Verdelho for the balanced, more thoughtfully executed

Chardonnay any day. All in all, not a bad week's work if you can take the pace.