

Part of what constitutes brand value in the world of wine is the expectation raised in a reasonably well-informed wine drinker by the mere mention of the name of the wine. "Tassenberg," for example, conjures up the idea of a good value drinking red - perhaps with an association related to a misspent youth or wild times on campus. The same is equally true of appellation. If someone says "Elim" you are supposed to think of cool climate sauvignon blanc, whereas "Swartland" evokes the idea of interesting, hand-crafted reds.

Connotation around brand changes slowly, a process which serves to protect producers who are under-performing, giving them time to make good, before the market punishes them. Unfortunately, this same time lag also makes it difficult for producers to obtain recognition for improvements. A cellar known to be a source of good value white wines will need many years of winning awards for deluxe reds before punters alter their perception.

Take Bellingham for example. In the 1970s it was a premium-priced innovative brand, selling one of the highest priced reds wines in the country (Bellingham Shiraz), the most sophisticated white wine (Bellingham Premier Grand Cru), the first of the dry Roses - and a late harvest wine called Johannisberger. It was this last-mentioned high volume sweet wine which in the end came to determine the Bellingham image. By the 1990s no one remembered its contribution to the country's high-end wine culture: Johannisberger was selling in truck-loads and its volumes determined the profile of the brand.

However, for the better part of the last 15 years the Bellingham cellar has been producing some of the Cape's most exciting wines. Firstly under Graham Weerts (now heading up winemaking at Kendall-Jackson in California) and for the past decade under Niels Groenewald, Bellingham has been the source of fabulous Chenin, Roussanne and Syrah - all three of which have garnered Platter 5 star awards. Add to that the 2013 The Bernard Series Viognier, which I tasted recently, and it is clear that Groenewald's achievements are not limited to the wines that won recognition from the Platter panel. The Viognier is a vinous rarity - at least in the South African context: a fragrant, savoury spicy dry white, still fresh, low-ish in alcohol and food friendly.

Despite the efforts of Bellingham's owners and the stellar performance of the winemakers to shake off the image of Johannisberger, Bellingham's The Bernard Series wines remain largely undiscovered in South Africa, selling to greater recognition abroad than at home. It might have been better to remain largely image-free than to have to battle against this weight of history.

Non-existent branding seems to have worked for Saxenburg: at least twenty years ago it burst briefly onto the wine scene, collecting awards mainly for its various shiraz bottlings, but (to my mind at least) with no abiding profile. Recently, two different Saxenburg shiraz wines landed up in one of my blind tastings and both performed admirably. The first was the 2015 standard cuvée - and it was impressive. Made in the more Barossa style, it offered Christmas pudding and crushed spice aromas, creamy textures, length, detail and nuance: a great bottle at R165.

Of course, if you'd prefer to spend your money before the National Treasury takes it from you, you can buy the Saxenburg 2007 Shiraz Select - comfortably one of the best of the properly mature wines still in the market. The fact that it's still about suggests that it hasn't been the cellar's top seller for the past decade - and the R800 per bottle price tag may have contributed to the sluggish sales. Perhaps in some of the more stratospheric wine drinking circles Saxenburg enjoys strong brand recognition. However, I'd hazard that very few serious wine-drinkers even know of this wine's existence. In a curious way this frees those who make pricing decisions at the property to do as they please. No brand burden is sometimes worth more than decades of trading history.