

The problem of vineyard virus has been a recurring theme amongst serious wine writers in South Africa - one that the critics and commentators have taken more seriously than many of the players more directly affected by the problem. This is partly because growers would like to wish it away (and probably believe that if they hear no evil and speak no evil there will be no evil). By the same token, the reason that those who care about wine quality refuse to be silent about it is that the fruit from virused vines is palpably impaired.

The virus most prevalent in South Africa is leaf-roll and once it infects a vine, it's there for life. If it is not in the original plant material, it is spread by mealy bugs (who systematically go from vine to vine) or by pruning secateurs (whose progress through the vineyards is equally inexorable). Once it's in a vineyard, if it's not isolated and the plant removed, everything will finally be infected. Clearly doing nothing about it is not a great strategy: it's a bit like ignoring your HIV and hoping it won't become full-blown AIDS.

The propensity to suppress the subject dates back to the era when the KWV controlled the supply of plant material. Clearly the producer organisation was deeply implicated (however unintentionally) in the dissemination of virused vines. Neither it - nor its cronies in the Old South Africa - were in a hurry to pick up the tab for the product liability claims which would flow like quicksilver if culpability could be established.

Today however, there's plenty of virus-free material available, so establishing a clean vineyard is hardly a challenge: the problem is to maintain its three star phyto-sanitary status. For most of this century Vergelegen in Somerset West has been working with Dr Gerhard Pietersen from the University of Pretoria on a project aimed at achieving exactly this. The operation runs on a combination of unbroken cold-chain logistics coupled with the rigorous application of quarantine procedures. In other words, make sure you begin with virus-free material. Then ensure that the scion is grafted onto virus-free rootstock. Then plant on land that has been properly prepared to ensure there is no residue from old virused vines. Then check all the vines annually. As and when virus appears, remove and replace the vine - and mark all the adjacent plants and monitor them - they are at greatest risk.

This is an expensive and painstaking operation (there are more than 100000 red fruit vines at Vergelegen) but the results have been nothing short of extraordinary. The oldest virus-free blocks are 18 years old and the estate is virtually free of its own endemic virus. Its greatest risks are from neighbouring farms - to the extent that they are being less methodical in their approach. There is - as I observed at the outset - an inexorability to the process.

Several other properties have adopted this - or a similar approach. Tokara and Thelema have been equally meticulous in weeding out virused material while Johann Rupert has overseen a full replanting exercise at Anthonij Rupert Wines/L'Ormarins and the same protocols now govern the management of the vines. However, if you add up the full extent of the country's vineyards subject to this programme, it would come to less than 1% of the national plantings. As long as everyone else is ignoring the problem, the propensity for virus to spread remains unacceptably high.

Gerhard Pietersen has been managing a similar programme for the 30 or so grape growers of Hawke's Bay's Gimlett Gravels - one of New Zealand's most important viticultural sites. Their unanimity has ensured the virtual elimination of the problem in little more than a decade. South African producers lack the inclination (and in many

cases the means) to adopt the same approach. Instead they act like motorists who don't maintain their vehicles and are then saddened and surprised when they finish up on the scrap heap.