

Wine fashions change over the years: once acceptable flavour profiles no longer appeal in some markets - or at least in some price categories. Chief among these is the “dusty,” “green” or “herbal” notes typical of cabernet (sauvignon and franc), but also present in several other varieties from cooler climates. There's a fine line between just ripe enough and a little too green. Perfectly harvested shiraz from the Northern Rhone is peppery; underripe fruit yields wine which is always chewy and herbal.

Factors affecting what is acceptable in a wine change for several reasons. One, certainly, is the pursuit of instant gratification: the old style clarets evolved slowly, kept fresh but also held back by the herbaceous, dusty notes in the young wines. Edmund Penning Rowsell, writing about Bordeaux in the late 1960s, remarked that when the 1928s emerged as very hard wines, those who believed in them compared them to the famous 1870s. Even then, he observed, “there was not now the same inclination to wait for 50 years.” Less patience and less cellar space has driven producers to make their young wines more accessible, which means ripening the fruit, as far as it's possible, to eliminate these green notes altogether.

Climate change has helped, as have technological advances which facilitate the sorting of fruit before fermentation, and also enable growers to play chicken with late summer weather. Greenness is usually considered a defect - which is a pity since, correctly judged, it's an important marker for long-term freshness and savouriness. Fearful of anything likely to attract negative comment, many winemakers eliminate the merest hints of under-ripeness from their wines. As a result, we've tilted a little too far in the other direction: over-ripe, gooey, opulent (and even “porty”) are considered preferable.

The problem is that freshness and savouriness are essential elements in wines destined for ageing and for serving with food. “Rich” and “velvety” is all very well, but once a red wine has to stand up to fat, oil and sauces, it needs some “bite” to fight back. Unfortunately there's no ready measure of an acceptable level of tanginess to the tannins of a red wine. When it comes to Cabernet Franc, notoriously more savoury than Cabernet Sauvignon, it's a narrow knife edge: I find many of the Loire wines simply too thin and harsh to offer any pleasure. Cape examples are generally far more attractive: Raats Dolomite comes to mind, as do most of the laureates at the recent Cabernet Franc Challenge. The top six at that event were, in alphabetical order: Doolhof Wine Estate Single Vineyard Collection Cabernet Franc 2015, Kaapzicht Cabernet Franc 2014, My Wyn Cabernet Franc 2014, Nelson Wine Estate Lisha Nelson Cabernet Franc 2014, Rainbow's End Wine Estate Limited Release 2015 and Warwick Estate Cabernet Franc 2013.

These savoury notes also appear often in pinot noir - not just South African examples - and tasting the full line-up of Hannes Storm's wines (three separate sites, Ridge, Ignis and Vrede) it was a more or less common element across all three vintages he's produced so far. Since it's less evident in the 2015s, it's tempting to be seduced by the softer riper wines of that vintage (all of which are delicious now, and with ample ageing potential ahead of them) and to denigrate the more savoury 2014s. However, I think the less fashionable vintage is worth the patience and I'm willing to wait for those slightly herbal notes to turn into Burgundian spice. By coincidence I sampled a 1984 Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir a few days before tasting the Storm wines. After thirty three years it was still youthful and evolving. It had been in bottle twenty years before Hannes Storm became the Hamilton Russell winemaker, and thirty years before he set off on his own venture. If the business of making fine wine takes a lifetime, why should we, as the beneficiaries of this process, be any less patient?