

The Swartland revolution, once the must-attend event on the Cape wine industry calendar, has vanished - more or less without a trace. Marc Kent - whose idea it was and who directed the annual bash with just the right balance between purposefulness and anarchy - decided that it had served its purpose and pulled the plug while the weekend-long party still expressed the edginess which attracted wine enthusiasts from around the country.

In little less than a decade it had helped to bring cachet and sexiness to what, on the surface, had been one of the clunkiest and least prepossessing of the country's appellations. Despite its proximity to Cape Town, the Swartland had resolutely avoided modernisation - making it a source of some of the country's best old vine fruit. By celebrating its frontier-like image, the Revolution captured its unique selling proposition. By the same token, it could not continue to do so without turning itself into an institution - which would be self-defeating. Like populist movements the world over, its true power lay in the appeal of opposition.

Iconoclasm - rather than the comfort-zone of the status quo - has become an increasingly common feature in the world of fine wine. Notwithstanding this pattern, the long-established appellations of the Old World have largely withstood the late 20th century assault of the New World. Both have profited from a growing number of fine wine consumers: Californian Cabernet prices have increased alongside those of the great wines of Bordeaux, Kiwi pinots alongside the Grand Crus of the Cote de Nuits.

At a recent presentation of the wines of Glenelly (timed to show off the newly launched winery Bistro run by Christophe Dehosse) one of South Africa's (generally) more insightful wine writers muttered something under his breath about the irrelevance of Stellenbosch cabernet. Now admittedly the commentator is someone besotted with new wave Cape wine - but his comment has probably appeared at some stage on his blog and provoked no outraged response from his readers. In short it's a view which would find some support amongst the country's fine wine consumers.

Glenelly is a major Cape property and its very existence is something of an endorsement of the potential of South Africa (in general) and Stellenbosch (in particular) to produce world-class Bordeaux-style red wines. It was developed by May de Lencquesaing, who at the time she bought the land was the proprietor of Chateau Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande, comfortably one of the top ten Medoc estates. What she acquired a little over ten years ago was an old fruit farm, entirely without vines, adjacent to Rustenberg at the gateway to Ida's Valley in Stellenbosch. Over the past decade - at an investment substantial enough to buy up half the Swartland - she has turned Glenelly into a showpiece estate. Its best wines are largely modelled on the great reds of Bordeaux - as much a consequence of her background as it is a truth about what performs well in Stellenbosch.

If you wanted to produce a great cabernet-based wine in South Africa, you wouldn't go to Elgin or Walker Bay: you'd buy premium Stellenbosch land, you'd invest in a proper winery, and you'd secure the services of a methodical, patient and technically competent winemaker. Stellenbosch is generally not for edgy, artisanal wines: to make the most of the appellation you need a long term vision and deep pockets. Happily for those who want to enjoy the full spectrum of South Africa's fine wine potential, the range of possibilities does not have to be reduced to either/or options. Just as the top Old World regions have not suffered from the arrival of the New World as a fine wine source, so it's not necessary to disregard the traditional South African appellations just

because newer ones have recently become fashionable. The great Stellenbosch estates may not have the appeal of whatever is currently the new frontier, but they yield reds which, properly aged, rival the best of Bordeaux and Napa.