

The Cape wine industry divides into three broad divisions: the big (often bulk) wine producers, the estate (or at least site-specific) growers and the rock star guerillas. The major wholesalers, the converted co-ops and the (often premium) high volume cellars fall into the first category. The smaller - generally long established wineries - are in the second and the so-called young guns/Young Turks buying in fruit and renting cellar space make up the third.

Each has its own unique selling proposition: the large wineries manage their production processes so well that they can pretty much guarantee qualities and quantities across vintages. They achieve this less by defaulting to bland ordinariness than by focusing on a wide range of fruit sources. The young guns are unashamedly edgy: they chase down small blocks of (usually) old vines and hand-craft tiny volumes which both reflect site as well as their own idiosyncratic production methods. The middle category, the real estates, usually own or at least control their own vineyards, and have been producing wines from them for several decades. Their business depends on consistency and dedication, from viticulture and long term investment to the infrastructure necessary to manage mid-volume brands.

Warwick's Mike Ratcliffe chose to showcase several of the key members of this grouping at the recent Cape Wine expo in Cape Town, setting up a tasting at which each of the selected producers had to present 10 vintages of the same product. The line-up included Warwick and Vilafonte (both properties in the Ratcliffe stable), Hamilton Russell Vineyards, Hartenberg, Kanonkop, Sadie Family Vineyards and Klein Constantia. They shared in common a real sense of substance, of players whose commitment to what they were doing outweighed the smoke-and-mirrors of brand. With seven such players in the room (and there could easily have been another five or ten), it was impossible not to be impressed by the gravitas of the occasion.

When it comes to reporting on the wines, it's important not to regard scores as compelling preferences. For example, of the ten vintages of Hartenberg Gravel Hill I sampled, I scored the 2005 and the 2011 highest but I would happily have had almost any of them with my dinner. The Vilafonte Series C array was in many ways the most striking statement: the purest reflection of the intentions of Zelma Long and Phil Freese in setting up the site and making the wines they envisaged it would yield. My scores acknowledge the polish of their performance as well as the relative lack of vintage variation.

The Hamilton Russell Pinots were the most affected by the more extreme weather conditions of their site, as well as the perennial virus problems of pinot vineyards. That said, there were several charming older wines and the latest releases (2012 and 2013) were among my highlights of the tasting. I confess to always having been ambivalent about Eben Sadie's Columella, so his line-up was possibly my most important learning opportunity of the evening. At the end of that particular vertical I felt I was (in the words of Lord Birkenhead) "no wiser but at least better informed." The striking quality of the oldest of them - the 2004 - suggests that the younger ones still have plenty of evolution ahead of them.

The Kanonkops confirmed for me the property's claim to First Growth status, with the 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 amazingly even in quality. The Warwick Trilogy (where the vertical went back to 1989) tracked the coming of age of the property, and the Cape wine industry. The oldest was still very elegant, the 2010 was just as pure. Finally the Vins de Constance stood their ground as South African icons, even though the oldest (the

1987) had the highest score: the 2004 and the 2012 weren't far behind. More importantly, every bottle spoke of the site, the style and the value of custodianship - exactly what distinguishes wines of provenance from their industrial counterparts.

For detailed notes go to <http://www.winewizard.co.za/article/sa-greats-sighted-tasting/>