

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 20 February 2015

Until 1973 there were no regulations governing the integrity of wine labelling in South Africa. Several well known Cabernet Sauvignons from that era were made mainly with cinsaut (with a little shiraz, cabernet or pinotage added for colour and structure), and this only changed with the introduction of the Wine of Origin legislation that year. When it came to varietal names on labels, the new Act provided for a phasing in period. By the 1980s however, plantings had caught up with producers' pretensions and from then onwards at least 75% of the contents of the bottle were required to have been fermented from the fruit of the specified vine. (Nowadays, in accordance with European standard practice, this has been lifted to 85%.)

Where there was room for interpretation in the application of the regulations, the authorities tended to be overly bureaucratic. Tim Hamilton Russell was prosecuted for mentioning (in a chardonnay brochure, not even on the label), that the variety was planted in appellations like Meursault and Puligny Montrachet. It was also deemed to be illegal to mention the component parts of a blend - either on the label or in a promotional pamphlet. Consumers - deprived of this most basic information - came to assume that if the names of the varieties were not disclosed, this must be because they were "unmentionably" inferior. As a result, blended wines sold at a discount to single cultivar examples.

The launch of Meerlust Rubicon in the early 1980s helped to change this mindset. Notwithstanding the prohibition on disclosing the component varieties, it was widely known (journalists not being subject to the same constraints as producers) that Rubicon was one of the country's first Bordeaux blends. The rarity of Merlot and the reflected glory of a great French wine region undoubtedly added to its cachet.

Today it's common for blends to trade at a premium to single variety wines - Steenberg's Magna Carta is the cellar's most expensive white, Delaire-Graff's Laurence Graff Reserve sells for more than double the price of the property's cultivar wines. Wine drinkers have also come to recognise that a carefully assembled blend can deliver greater nuance and detail. Many of the wines produced by the industry's "Young Turks" are multiple-layered creations, often comprising a blend of sites and cultivars. David and Nadia Sadie's Aristargos, Eben Sadie's Columella and Palladius, Chris and Suzaan Alheit's Cartology and Magnetic North Mountain Makstok are all examples of how the cachet of the blend has come to outshine the brand value of cultivar, at least among wine buffs.

Blends have become so fashionable that sometimes wines which could be marketed as a single variety trade under a proprietary name. Both the Cartology and the Magnetic North Mountain Makstok could legally be sold as Chenin Blanc while the current release of the Ashbourne Sandstone (which is made up of 88% sauvignon blanc and 12% chardonnay) could come to market simply as a Sauvignon Blanc. In all these cases it is clear that the producer wishes to downplay the importance of the variety - the wine becomes a statement in its own right, undefined by cultivar, and sometimes even by place.

The Perdeberg Dryland Collection "Joseph's Legacy" 2012 is a strange amalgam of shiraz, cabernet, petit verdot and mourvedre - in short a combination of key components from Bordeaux and the Rhone - yet it works very well. With a cellar door price of around R80, it was not only the best, also the best value red at a recent blended wine tasting. The Bosman Adama white 2012 was the top scoring white. A blend of Chenin Blanc,

Chardonnay, Grenache Blanc and Viognier from Wellington, with Semillon and Pinot Gris from Hemel-en-Aarde, it's tangy and fresh despite the faintly honeyed lime blossom and grilled hazelnut aromas. Detailed and nuanced with bright mineral notes rounding off the finish, the Adama achieves exactly what is expected of a blend - which is that it should be greater than the sum of its parts.