

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 20 March 2015

There are countless good wines produced in the Cape. I'm not talking about show-stoppers made to justify extortionate pricing and to collect awards as part of their marketing strategy - though there's no shortage of these either. I'm speaking about well crafted "hand-made" examples delivering relatively instant gratification and selling for around R100 per bottle or less. These are a step up on commercial wines produced on an industrial scale and which deliver perfectly acceptable drinking, but are otherwise unremarkable except for their place on the price-quality nexus. They are also not the so-called "second labels" which come to market from the over-stocked wineries producing high profile trophy wines, and which need to "massage" supplies to balance robust price expectations with less-than-robust demand. They are simply the sensibly priced and honestly made artefacts of an industry which has seen an extraordinary proliferation of boutique size cellars but lives with stagnant levels of fine wine consumption.

Half of South Africa's wineries produce less than 7000 cases annually: these are volumes so small that route-to-market is more a matter of personal contact than grand promotional strategies. Exports, like domestic sales, are usually niche and erratic: mostly the business just ticks over, but the very act of maintaining a balance compels producers to over-deliver at an accessible price point. There's no opportunity to trade significant volumes by lifting prices and cherry picking barrels to make a "reserve selection." Of course, most will try a little of that sort of spin - it's money for jam - but the bread-and-butter of their business is - for the time being at least - sound value.

Domaine des Dieux's 2011 Chardonnay is positioned at the top end of of this price spectrum but it is beautifully put together - good fruit intensity, harmoniously oaked, textured but not overly opulent, persistent and still fresh. The Hemel-en-Aarde estate's near neighbour - La Vierge - offers an equally fine 2013 "Jezebelle" Chardonnay - delicate honey-suckle aromas and a light, almost tangy citrus finish. The same cellar's Italian blend (called "Satyricon" and comprising Sangiovese, Barbera and Nebbiolo) is a delicious and savoury red, with red berry notes and textured but not grippy tannins: it delivers real vinosity for around R100 per bottle.

Highlands Road in Elgin produces a number of very fine white wines: the 2012 Sine Cera white Bordeaux blend which won the RisCura White Hot Wine Awards is priced just over the R100 per bottle threshold but the sauvignon blanc costs considerably less and ages beautifully. (The 2009 was the top scoring sauvignon at last year's Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show). The Petit Rouge from Vondeling in the Voor-Paardeberg delivers real weight, flavour and density on the palate - all for a mere R50. The cellar's 2013 Baldrick - a Shiraz-Mourvedre-Viognier blend - is precise and nuanced, with just enough peppery spice from the shiraz to lift the smoky red fruit notes of the mourvedre.

Herold Pinot Noir sells for way less than R100 (it's one of the house-wines at Bistro Michel at the BluBird Centre in Johannesburg - where a 500 ml carafe costs a mere R70 at the table). Free of overt oak, it has a purity of fruit (juicy, with cherry and strawberry notes) which would be the envy of many a Kiwi producer.

Finally, for those wine-drinkers for whom cabernet is still the king, it would be hard to find better value than the 2011 Paradyskloof. Jan Boland Coetzee was the winemaker who launched the modern era at Kanonkop (in the 1970s) - so there's not much he needs to learn about the cultivar. While lately he has focused his attention more on Burgundy

varieties (the Vriesenhof Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are classics of a kind), his Paradyskloof Cabernet is elegant rather than austere, its cassis fruit layered with fine leafy whiffs - Bordeaux in everything but name and price, and happily (at only 14%), without the “new world” alcohol.