

Business Day, 20 May 2016

When Ken Forrester launched his now iconic FMC (the Forrester-Meinert Chenin Blanc) some fifteen years ago, he did so into a market which could not even imagine a premium chenin blanc. The near R200 price point, which at the time positioned it alongside the country's most expensive reds, was so outrageous that it did a great promotional job for the brand.

In those days chenin was the cheap-and-cheerful workhorse of the industry, a component in many of the ubiquitous blends making up the bulk of the country's wine offering. Despite the fact that competitions such as the Chenin Challenge, launched several years previously, had drawn attention to the premium potential of the cultivar in South Africa, the incipient chenin cult was still in its infancy. The variety's potential was known to a few of the country's winemakers and a small circle of wine geeks.

Over the years the FMC has grown into its price point - a euphemism for saying that it doesn't look nearly as expensive now as it did then, but also that the price has not kept track with inflation. No doubt the increase in volumes has compensated Forrester for the erosion in price. Meanwhile the top end of the red wine market has moved inexorably upwards: the cult wines of the millennium have been superseded by the next generation of ultra-deluxe offerings whose nominal on-shelf price is between five and seven times higher than at the turn of the century.

The FMC is not suddenly going to recover this lost ground, nor, at over R400 per bottle, does it need to. However, in that time the chenin category has really taken off. Last week the Wine of the Week on JancisRobinson.com was a South African chenin blend called "The Liberator" of which Jancis wrote: "This a serious dry white wine that would sell for a lot more than £12-13 a bottle if it came from any other country. South Africa continues to be the source of some of the finest wine value in the world - especially white wine value."

So along comes Forrester with another proposition - this time called "Dirty Little Secret" made with grapes sourced from an old chenin vineyard in the Piekenierskloof and selling for a mere R900. And everyone is doing it all over again - they're telling him he's mad, and does he really think he can get the punters to pay this kind of money for a white wine. It's a wholly different proposition from the FMC, made in the funkier, edgier style, without the overt taste of new oak to add opulence to the fruit - and clearly designed to catch the fashion for heritage sites and more old-fashioned vinification strategies.

As it happens, last week also saw the publication in WineMag of the results of a blind tasting of the country's super-premium reds - wines trading for between R1000 and R2500 per bottle. The combined scores of the wealthy wine buyers who participated in this exercise put the Kanonkop Black Label Pinotage 2014 (at R1430) on top and the Simonsig The Garland 2009 at the bottom, whereas Christian Eedes, the WineMag editor, had The Garland top and the Kanonkop in number five position. He attempted to account for the difference in preferences by suggesting that "sweet and smooth trumps savoury and grippy....the well-heeled punter doesn't want anything too challenging."

I think the issues are more complex than this, but it is clear that, rather like the smell of leather upholstery in a luxury car, oak has become the subliminal indicator of price at the top end of the South African wine market. This has prompted a number of winemakers and commentators to shift dramatically in an opposite direction - with little middle ground at present for compromise. It's no surprise that Ken Forrester (long one of the most astute and forward-thinking of the country's producers) has made "Dirty Little Secret" the battle-song for the Republic of Authentic Winemaking.

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