

It's not just the producers with vineyards in Stellenbosch who believe it is South Africa's most important wine appellation. Viticultural land prices confirm its pre-eminence. When it comes to paying for the place name which goes onto the label, demand and supply has made Stellenbosch dirt more valuable than the dirt of Paarl, Wellington, Durbanville and Robertson. There are a number of reasons for this, not all of them to do with the grape-growing potential. One is the area's proximity to Cape Town. If you want to have a fashionable wine farm and still be part of the city lights, Stellenbosch is closer than most. (Constantia, of course, is closer still but there's much less agricultural land there. Durbanville could be a candidate, but very little of the vineyard comes with much of a view). Then the town itself has culture and charm, the intellectual life that comes with being the home to one of South Africa's oldest universities.

There are certainly enough high profile properties within the appellation to convey the idea that it is a fine wine centre. Cynics might argue that this concentration of prime wineland real estate has driven the up the image and the land prices, and may perhaps have help to create the reality. There'd be some truth to that. The majority of the Cape's R100m+ winery and vineyard investments has been in Stellenbosch, and the speed with which they have obtained recognition (and not just "profile") suggests that the money has been relatively well spent. Twenty years ago Vergelegen, Tokara, Delaire Graff, DeMorgenzon, Morgenster, Waterford and Glenelly had not even made it to the lower rungs of the ladder. Today they have a real presence in the places that count. A portion of their success has something to do with their proprietors, a portion to do with the fact that they are more easily able to attract the best winemakers, and a portion to do with their accessibility as tourist destinations. No matter how good the wines, how well known the owners - if they had been on the other side of the Du Toitskloof Pass, there isn't a chance they'd be as well known today, or as successful.

Of course, not all Stellenbosch properties are vast, nor do they demand R100m+ investments to achieve results. Some are long-established and unflashy - like Kanonkop, whose status as a quality producer is pretty much without peer, but whose cellar only gets an upgrade after a fire, or because the inefficiency of its layout requires a tweak or two. Others do well without big bank balances by dint of the sheer force of personality of their proprietors: Beyerskloof, Neil Ellis and Ken Forrester come to mind. Some do well because everything has been put in place properly, and those who run it combine great technical expertise with sound business sense: Jordan, Thelema and Villiera are the obvious examples.

Then there are literally dozens of Stellenbosch cellars which never quite garner the same attention, perhaps because they have been in the same family for generations and there isn't the capital available for them to lift their game. And there are places like Haskell Vineyards, newish, smallish, adequately capitalised, properly managed but not yet with quite the same visibility. Tasting the current crop of wines produced by Rianie Strydom - consistently one of the country's most successful winemakers - I wondered about this. The 2016 Platter Guide includes two Haskell Five Star awards, one for the Anvil Chardonnay 2014, restrained and concentrated, and one for the Haskell IV 2010 red blend. The other Haskell reds are just as smart - the Pillars Syrah and the Aeon. The cellar's Dombeya range is decent enough, with a Chardonnay that comfortably over-delivers at its price point. Does the cellar simply lack critical mass, is the Haskell range just a little too pricy, does Dombeya dissipate the brand message? Perhaps this is how Preston Haskell likes things: fine wines, properly priced, and just a little hard to find.

Stellenbosch at Summer Place: 25th November. Email events@wineroute.co.za or book

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