

The market for locally produced champagne-method sparkling wine (now universally recognised by its South African nomenclature of Methode Cap Classique - MCC) has been growing strongly and consistently for more than a decade. A style of wine pioneered in South Africa by the late Frans Malan of Simonsig over 40 years ago, bottle fermented sparkling wine took off very slowly. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, in those days a bottle of Grande Marque Champagne retailed for around R6-00. No matter how much cheaper the Cape version was, the difference between the price of a bottle of Simonsig and a reputable French brand was not sufficient to sway the market. Then there was the problem of a dire shortage of Champagne cultivars: until the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was simply not enough quality pinot noir and chardonnay for the Cape to produce a plausible alternative to French fizz.

The brands that flourished in the 1980s - Villiera's Tradition, for example - were made mostly from varieties like chenin and pinotage, which were readily available and, to everyone's surprise, yielded delicious bubbly. Still, they weren't all that champagne-like, so that as long as the French product was vaguely affordable, it over-shadowed the efforts of the local industry.

In a way, this was hardly fair: by the time producers were able to secure sufficient quantities of the champagne varieties, they were making wines which even the French grudgingly conceded were pretty smart. This is not to suggest that their aim was to produce a French lookalike (after all, the soil and climatic conditions of the two countries could hardly be described as similar). Merely that the years spent developing the market had created a depth of wine-making talent and this expertise was evident for all to see.

For most of this century there have been adequate supplies of chardonnay and pinot noir - and more recently pinot meunier (the work horse of the Champagne region) - so sales have grown solidly and are now said to total 7m bottles a year. On the way, a number of boutique producers have made wines which have served to elevate the price point of the category, while the bigger cellars have invested in longer matured prestige cuvées which provide an alternative rationale for higher pricing.

The recent launch by Krone of a recently disgorged (RD) aged release from the 2001 vintage is a reflection of this trend, but it will also be an important driver for the premium segment of the Cap Classique market. Krone was a pioneer in MCC production, and it holds bottles still resting on their lees dating back to the 1997 vintage. This is potentially an extraordinary asset for any fizz producer. Extended yeast lees contact is the gold standard when it comes to enhancing the complexity of a bottle-fermented sparkling wine. The so-called Maillard effect - which delivers the baked bread/brioche notes so sought after by consumers and producers alike - increases with either time or temperature. When bread is baked, it's the temperature which delivers the result. Since heat is not an option for fizz producers, the much slower length-of-ageing alternative is the only option.

Krone has several potential RD releases in the pipeline. The 1997 would certainly appeal to consumers of mature Champagne. It has the nutty, biscuity notes they find so desirable. The 2000 vintage is as ready to come to market as the 2001. The 2004 looks equally promising, while the 2007 is way too youthful at this stage for any decision to be taken - though winemaker Stephan de Beer has high hopes for it.

The Krone RD 2001 sells at around R300 per bottle. This isn't much of a premium on the

price of the quality standard cuvées in the trade, but it comes with the added value (and cost) of 12 years of meaningful additional maturity. For fizz aficionados with moderately deep pockets, purchasing some of the 4000 or so bottles produced shouldn't prove a difficult decision.