

A few years ago it took a degree of courage to contemplate a line-up of South African shirazes. The variety was largely misunderstood, planted by growers who believed (even as the world was going into massive over-supply) that it was the “next big thing,” and vinified by winemakers whose inspiration was the overripe so-called Southeastern Australian style whose volumes have since plummeted worldwide. By 2010 South African plantings had increased ten-fold compared with 15 years before, but our competence in producing decent wine had not kept up with the pace of getting *stokkies* into the ground. The results too often were thick porty reds which lacked freshness and were prone to bacterial spoilage.

Much has changed in the past few years: increasingly those whose wines raised themselves from the morass of mediocrity of the industry average have become increasingly adept at managing their vineyards and producing appealingly refined reds. It's perfectly possible now to look down a restaurant wine list and find several examples which are accessible without being simple, and affordable without being cheap. From former co-ops like Klawer cellars, whose 2014 is juicy without being voluptuous, and peppery without being thin, to estates like Vrede en Lust, whose 2012 is now showing real evolution, vinous, flamboyant, persistent.

Looking through a few months of tasting notes I've discerned a marked improvement across a range of shiraz scores, some reflecting an ongoing upward tick for established producers such as the Bon Courage (Inkara 2013), others new heights for players who have been at the top of their game for some time. The Reyneke Reserve 2013 is simply masterly, a combination of primary fruit notes, more cherry than raspberry, but also presenting complex savoury and spice nuances.

This improvement in the average quality of Cape shiraz is also translating into much better Rhone-style blends. Zonnebloem's Shiraz Mourvedre Viognier 2014 - of which shiraz represents some 87% of the final wine - has just the right balance of red fruit and ground white pepper to make it something of a future classic. Leeuwenkuil, an increasingly impressive Swartland producer, has a pretty acceptable 2013 standard release but a delicious shiraz-based blend (the Lion's Lair Reserve) from the 2011 which is worth tracking down. If you're feeling extravagant and you're willing to splash out for a wine which delivers consistently at the top end of the market, you might like to buy the La Motte Hanneli R 2011, the latest release of a wine which has enjoyed an ultra-premium price point since the maiden 2005.

Of course, on the other side of the pricing spectrum there is also good shiraz to be found, with the Rooiberg 2014 providing a striking example. The Rooiberg winery near Robertson was one of the first Cape cellars I did any work with just after I had entered the wine trade. The general manager - and pretty much star winemaker - was a man named “Dassie” Smit who was producing some of the country's cleanest, most fragrant dry white wines from chenin, colombard and even ugni blanc. I was charged with creating house wines for Benny Goldberg's Liquor Supermarket - and there was enough good wine at Rooiberg to make this the easiest part of my various duties. The problem - if indeed there was one - was simply about elimination: tank after tank of fresh, accessible and zesty white wines we could retail in the late 1970s for R1-29 per bottle.

Nowadays you need to have R50 in your pocket to enjoy the same buying power, which may make the Rooiberg Shiraz a little pricey at about R80. However, the 2015 Chardonnay is a full R10 cheaper and it's equally impressive. Rooiberg is clearly back to producing fabulous value wines, though with varieties which simply did not exist in any

meaningful quantities when I first dealt with Dassie. Back then, there wasn't a single bottle of chardonnay produced in South Africa, and probably no more than ten different brands of shiraz. Times have changed.