

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 22 May 2015

Craft is taking the liquor markets of the world by storm - and while some beverages are undoubtedly artisanal, the term “craftiness” best describes the marketing strategies of brewers, distillers and wine producers who have decided that this particular “hand-made” band-wagon is worth the ride. There are single cask whiskies which fetch R10k per bottle simply because the barrel was previously home to madeira, port or even Italian red wine. There are “craft” breweries that produce industrial volumes. The success of these enterprises surely proves that those smart (or well-connected) enough to make a fortune which would be the envy of Croesus are insecure enough to part with it simply to prove how sophisticated they are.

The wine industry has not been able to resist the easy money of the “craft” party. It's always made a selling point about shortage: in his satire about Bordeaux wine pricing written many years ago, Peter Sichel had a dig at 'less is better' marketing with the story of a particularly small (and not very good) vintage. “Christian (presumably a reference Moueix of Chateau Petrus) who never made very much wine made so little [in that year] that he could not even find it, so he did not have any at all to sell. Perhaps he thought that as people would pay so much for the little wine he usually made, they might pay even more for none at all.”

At a recent tasting I was introduced to the current line-up of wines from The Drift. I was a little surprised to find the (admittedly very pretty) pinot noir priced at well over R400 per bottle. True, the label paper had been specially imported from Italy. The labels had been produced on an old letterpress printer, after which the paper had been hand-cut (naturally) and applied by hand to the bottle. My problem was that I had come to taste wine - not sneak a peak at the Gutenberg bible. Savvy producers may sometimes act rustic, but it seems that they think like the marketing department at Louis Vuitton.

I'm sure I'm not alone in querying the relationship between rarity, price and quality, and arguably if the wines sell (and continue to sell) they must be “worth” whatever is being asked for them. Take the Mvemve Raats De Compostella, the latest release of which sells in South Africa for R900. Bruwer Raats tells me the production is around 6000 bottles and most of it is sold overseas. Even assuming the ex-cellar export price is one third of the South African retail price, it's not cheap wine - wherever it lands up on the shelf. It's well made, polished and beautifully presented. Enough people clearly think that the quality justifies the price-tag.

I'd rather drink the Liberté Pinotage from Raats's new venture (B Vintners) where there's real fruit purity at roughly one sixth the price, or Nico van der Merwe's 2013 Mas Nicolas Syrah. If you're going to pay over R200 per bottle, it shouldn't be because of a producer's carefully crafted sense of shortage. Real value (if there's such a thing) resides in the overall appeal of the wine (once the label - hand-made or not - is invisible), and perhaps in the difficulty of obtaining comparable drinking pleasure from any other wine-producing region. If it's pinot that you want to drink, you can get delicious examples from Burgundy and New Zealand for around R350 per bottle. Why would you pay more for an inferior (but rarer) local bottling?

The best South African chenins, chardonnays, sauvignon-semillon blends, noble late harvests and aged muscadels offer drinking pleasure that would be difficult to obtain for less than R1000 anywhere in the world. You can also get more enjoyment for R150 from Cape cabernet, shiraz and sauvignon blanc than \$12 will buy you in France, the US,

Australia or Chile. So when it comes to craft, the Roman adage *caveat sucker* applies.