

When cellarmasters in the 1980s spoke of themselves as “wine-growers” rather than as “wine-makers” there seemed a refreshing modesty to their “wines are grown not made” mantra. It was easy to slip into the trap of assuming they were little more than mid-wives, pulling out the baby at due date but entirely detached from its DNA.

Non-interventionist wine-making is largely a fiction: someone must decide when to harvest, when to crush, when to draw the wine off the skins, in what receptacles and for how long to age it, when to bottle it and how to manage the packaging process. But in fact, if you take a step back, when the vineyard was laid out someone had to decide what varieties and what clones to plant, what rootstocks to use, how to prepare the soil, whether to trellis or not and what pruning system to apply. Often these decisions are made by grape growers without even a thought about the wine which may eventually be produced.

Quality winemaking is always the result of an intention. Phil Freese, a partner in Vilafonte and the man who laid out the Rothschild-Mondavi Opus One vineyards more than three decades ago, puts it very succinctly. “I know that it is currently popular for people to talk about and say with great authority that ‘wine is made in the vineyards.’ While I agree with the words, I fear that most of the speakers are talking about what I call the ‘tactical’ sense of management - the ‘what did I do this year to respond to the vineyard needs.’

“In fact the statement to have any real meaning must first of all start as a ‘strategic’ statement - getting the vineyard design correct from site selection, clone and rootstocks, soil preparation, vine spacing, etc. etc. To get the strategic design and decisions correct it means one has to have clear and well developed vision of the wine outcome being sought and then work with the characteristics of the site to provide a vineyard that does not require a lot of ‘tactical’ fiddling to get it right year-on-year.”

A recent wine industry event hosted by Cape Point Vineyards and De Toeren provided a perfect opportunity to see the proprietor’s intention in action - not necessarily in the same rigorous way Freese is talking about - but certainly in terms of achieving desired outcomes. Cape Point was the first serious vineyard venture in Noordhoek. The simple selection of that chilly, windblown western slope of the Constantia/Silvermine range, followed by the (inevitable) decision to plant cool climate varieties like sauvignon blanc and semillon, defined Sybrand van der Spuy’s vision for the estate. Choosing a talented cool climate winemaker like Duncan Savage vastly increased his chances of obtaining strikingly fresh, intense and zesty white wines. Given the site, had he been thinking of rich, full bodied reds no winemaker on earth could have implemented his intention.

By the same token, if what you want to bring to market are rich, polished, opulent cabernet-based red wines, you would seek out an area with a track record of yielding appropriate fruit, and then make sure you have a winemaker willing to push ripeness to the limit (without tipping over into the slippery slope of “porty.”) Emil den Dulk’s De Toren operation has always been entirely consistent with this vision. It has been bringing premium reds (mainly, but not exclusively Bordeaux blends) to the market since the release of its first vintage almost two decades ago. None of its wines have ever been lean or green: all have been relatively high in alcohol, all have delivered tannins as smooth as teflon-coated velvet, all have been instantly drinkable, all have been packaged and presented to the highest expectations of the international market.

You cannot separate the hands-on, clear-thinking and visionary proprietor from what

lands up in the bottle. Sure, wines are grown not made, but, even before the wine, comes the conception.