

When it comes to celebrating the wines of the Cape Winemakers Guild, in the past I have been more diffident than enthusiastic. In the very early days of the Guild - back in the 1980s - we were all quite excited about the advent of craft winemaking in the Cape. However, as the Guild came of age and prices at the annual auction started to move dramatically upwards, the question of what was really attracting the premium became an issue. Suddenly it was important to question if these “rare” wines were all they were cracked up to be.

From the mid-1990s onwards the primary point of difference between the producers' standard offering and what was consigned to the Guild auction was an extra dollop of oak. Then more recently, the extra oak came with a sense of even more “pushing-the-envelope” ripeness - in other words, playing chicken with the balance in order to squeeze ever greater opulence into the offering. It worked as a strategy. Prices have risen year on year and the smaller volume sale now achieves turnovers which dwarf the longer established Nederburg auction.

In the past year or two there has been a marked improvement in the overall quality, with fewer faults, more savoury fruit, less visible oak. There also emerged a more palpable qualitative difference between the auction wine, and the cellar's regular bottling - and this was reflected in the prices achieved at the annual sale. Clearly the premium was both a function of enhanced product quality and the special release sales environment - which is in the nature of the luxury goods market: buyers with that kind of loot should be adult enough to know how far to go. At least from this point onwards there was the beginning of a correlation between price and value.

A few weeks ago the Guild hosted the pre-auction tasting for the 2016 sale - which will take place in Stellenbosch on 1<sup>st</sup> October. This time I was blown away by the quality of the line-up. For the first time we are seeing a seismic shift in what is being produced at the pinnacle of the real (rather than the rockstar) wine market. Sure, the whites have benefited from the extraordinary quality of the 2015 harvest (Vriesenhof's Jan Boland Coetzee observed that he has waited 43 years for such a vintage). Indeed the 2016s - when they come to the market a year from now - will prove a better test of the winemakers' skills. But even that slight caveat aside, the line-up in this year's catalogue is so significantly better than anything we have seen in the past that it is safe to say a threshold has been crossed. In an array of just under 40 wines I scored more over 90 than than in the sum total of all my tastings (probably 3500 wines) all year. Many of the wines which finished in the high 80s might, in less illustrious company, have made it into the magical last decade. There were almost no ordinary wines - a sign that the selection process is now as rigorous as the Guild claims - and certainly no junk. The pre-auction tasting for the Guild's 2016 sale was quite unlike any presentation of Cape wine I've ever attended.

It's impossible in the available space to do anything except list the highlights (a full set of my tasting notes is available on [winewizard.co.za](http://winewizard.co.za)), so here are the details of the 90 points (and higher) laureates. Silverthorn Big Dog II Cap Classique 2011, Nicky Versfeld Double Barrel Semillon, Kaapzicht 1947 Auction Selection Chenin Blanc 2015, Ataraxia Under the Gavel Chardonnay 2015, Newton Johnson Seadragon Pinot Noir 2015, Cederberg Teen die Hoog Shiraz 2014, Sijnn awa 2014, Rijk's CWG Pinotage 2013, Beyerskloof Traildust Pinotage 2014 and Boplaas Cape Vintage Reserve (Port) 2009.

You can be sure that, recession notwithstanding, all these wines will achieve staggering prices - but for the first time they may at least be worth it.