

It was hardly an ordinary day in the winelands. It began with an hour-long tasting and discussion with Pierre Lurton, who heads up Chateaux Cheval Blanc and d'Yquem, and has been an advisor to Morgenster for most of the estate's modern era. It then moved on to Vilafonte, for a similar exercise with the estate's co-owners, Zelma Long and Phil Freese, where the comparative sampling exercise involved a couple of Napa's cult wines.

Lurton comes to the Cape at least once a year, so his presence is less feted than, for example, when Romanee-Conti's Aubert de Villaine makes the occasional promotional trip. Yet when it comes to the wines of Bordeaux, there has not been anyone like Lurton in the past two centuries - someone who heads up two of the region's most iconic cellars, and who has significantly raised the game at both of them. The same is true of Zelma Long and Phil Freese, both legends of the Californian wine industry. Long, who used to be in charge of winemaking for Chandon Estates in the USA, is widely regarded as one of the most influential women in the world of wine; Phil Freese is a pioneering viticulturist amongst whose projects has been the Rothschild-Mondavi Opus One vineyard.

The round-table discussion with Pierre Lurton and Morgenster winemaker Henry Kotze came with two (more or less current) bottlings of the estate wine - the 2010 and the 2011, and a selection of several reputable Bordeaux wines from the same two vintages. What was striking about this exercise was how the French examples were anything but supreme in the line-up. The Langoa Barton 2010 was distinctly oaky, in a slightly coarse, unintegrated kind of way; the Giscours was pretty but without nuance. On the other hand, both vintages of the Morgenster were very fine, with the 2011 utterly sublime.

There's no doubt that while most of the credit for this should go to cellar master Henry Kotze (whose first vintage at the estate was the 2010), the role played by Lurton and the technical team at Cheval Blanc should not be under-estimated. Despite the shortcomings of the much more expensive international examples, they were the classically styled wines on which the Morgenster has been modelled. In less than two decades Morgenster has caught up with its benchmarks.

The tasting at Vilafonte was pretty much the New World equivalent of the Morgenster Bordeaux exercise. Vilafonte has always reflected the stylistics that Long and Freese have chosen to bring to the wine: delivering ripeness of fruit, textured, almost creamy tannins, no edgy green notes but also no overripe portiness. It's something of a viticultural and production tight-rope. Evenness of ripeness, bunch and berry selection, ample but not excessive extraction, dense rather than showy oaking. The success of the strategy requires the wines to survive protracted maturation - young wines conceal frailties and the propensity for premature ageing rather too easily. Looking back on vintages of both the Series M and Series C that are now eight to ten years it is clear that the wines get pushed to the limit, but never beyond.

The two Napa icon wines which helped to contextualise the Vilafonte achievement were from Kenzo - and retail for around \$300 per bottle. Both were significantly more alcoholic than the Vilafontes, certainly on the palate and (if the information which appears on the labels is subject to the same tolerances) in the bottle. The Kenzo Murasaki comprises mainly merlot and malbec - which lines it up conveniently alongside the Vilafonte Series "M." The Kenzo Ai fits equally well with the cabernet-dominated Vilafonte Series "C." In absolute terms, I would rather have had the Vilafontes than the Kenzos (forget about the vast price difference), just as I would have preferred the Morgenster to the Langoa Barton. It seems that as long as we cannot fully recognise the

value of the Lurton/Long-Freese involvement in South Africa, we're not going to value fully the wines they produce here.