

Aesthetic judgements are a fertile environment for conflict, partly because there are no absolutes, partly because they are usually located in the realm of deep emotions. One man's masterpiece is another man's chocolate box: harmonious or cacophonous, fresh or hackneyed, elegant or clunky - there are no broadly agreed guidelines.

At a wine writers' conference held in the United States last year Jon Bonné, who champions the less showy style of Californian wine, took issue with Robert Parker (indisputably the world's most influential wine critic) over an article Parker had written which pilloried many of the fresher, lighter new generation wines. Parker described those promoting the style as "Eurocentric, self-proclaimed purists" and defended his position by saying he had not been against lower alcohol wines per se, but against those whose preoccupation with lower alcohols came at the expense of flavour. "What I'm railing about there is that if you intentionally go out and say, well, I've got to make a lower alcohol wine so I'm just going to pick earlier, you're really just picking under-ripe fruit that isn't going to give the full expression of terroir."

The discussion which ensued highlighted the absence of aesthetic agreement between the two positions. Bonné's "over-ripe" could be Parker's "opulent and concentrated" while Parker's "flavourless and too acidic" might satisfy Bonné's criteria for elegance and freshness. Bonné is by no means the sole spokesman for the "refined wine" position. Rajat Parr, a San Francisco sommelier who is now a winemaker, has long championed an alternative, less plush style for his native Californian wines. In 2008 he and Hirsch Vineyards' Jasmine Hirsch founded a group which they have called "In Pursuit of Balance" and which has attracted a significant number of new wave Californian wine-makers.

We're seeing a similar pattern on the fringe of the Cape wine industry (fringe only because many of the wines are not easily obtained, and nor are all of them readily understood by mainstream consumers.) Associated initially with the "young Turks" of the Swartland, the numbers have grown significantly in the past few years. Many of the wines are less easily obtained in Gauteng than the Cape, and very few appear on local restaurant wine lists. In part this is because many producers manage their own sales via their mailing lists, minimising the loss of margin they would have to share with distributors, and partly because none of them would pay the listing fees which have become a feature of the on-consumption trade.

Volumes are also restricted because of shortages in working capital, the focus on single site (usually old vine) plantings and because marketing strategies create no new customer berths on the cellar mailing lists. In the typical commercial model of these (seemingly uncommercial) operations, supply can only grow if the winemaker finds another vineyard site whose fruit he can contract to his cellar, and if he has sufficient funds to take on this commitment. Until then, volume fluctuation is vintage driven and the variances are usually mopped up by the existing customer base. A mailer is sent out to those who have supported the project from the outset and since they generally commit to their annual allocations, there's little chance for newcomers to secure any stock.

Arguably, little turns on this - the Irish have a proverb which says "there are more fish in the sea than have ever been caught." There's enough good wine around that obsessing about what you might not have been able to secure from these minuscule operations is a largely fruitless exercise. However, if I had to establish a list of producers/wines that justify the extra effort it would include Ginny Povall's Botanica Mary Delany Chenin

Blanc, Chris Alheit's Magnetic North Mountain Makstok, Saffraan from Mount Abora, The Fledge & Company's Klipspringer Steen and David Sadie's Aristargos. There are also many I haven't tasted, of which John Seccombe's Thorne & Daughters Zoetrope currently heads my wish list.