

The 2015 edition of Cape Wine - a bi-annual event organised by Wines of South Africa as a showcase for buyers, commentators and critics from around the world - has come and gone. It saw more than two hundred influential international visitors descend on the Western Cape to sample the latest vintages and to talk to growers, producers and marketing folk - all with a view to recalibrating their impression of Cape wine.

It could not have come at a more important time for the country's wine farmers. The wine industry has been on a roll: never before has international recognition been this extensive and this positive. South African wine seems to have found its identity. The media-savvy rock star boutique producers have made the roadshows which are an essential part of the international wine business strikingly newsworthy. At the same time the increasingly wine-savvy large wholesalers are delivering well-branded quality wines in large volumes to key international markets. While the two component parts of the production sector make no attempt to dovetail their efforts, this happy coincidence has added considerably to the country's international appeal. So has the present currency weakness, which ensures that whatever leaves our shores over-delivers in terms of value.

Despite the generally upbeat mood, some exhibitors at Cape Wine lamented the seemingly low room attendance: with over 350 producers showing their wares over three days - to a total purchasing audience of roughly the same number, there was (inevitably) a sense of a beautifully decorated party venue that needed a bigger crowd to justify the investment. This is almost always what happens at trade shows - it's not about numbers, it's about the depth of the buyers' pockets, the reach of the writers' publications and the opportunity to transform sceptics into fans.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) is often (rightly) criticised for not doing enough for the country's wine producers. This was certainly not the case at Cape Wine 2015. Government money brought a significant number of international buyers to the show. After that, it's up to the producers to show their wares and provide the all-important hospitality. Judging from the programme (as well as my own experience) this was done on a scale that could only enhance the country's standing, even in markets where buyers are accustomed to the most sumptuous treatment.

Some of the bigger producers hosted dinners at The Test Kitchen, not only the country's most highly rated restaurant, but ranked 28th in the world by the authoritative San Pellegrino guide. Others booked the Ellerman House Wine Gallery, something of a temple to all things vinous and perhaps the most original wine space in the world. Meantime the industry's lunatic fringe persisted in doing things their way. Under the banner of The Zoo Biscuits they presented their idiosyncratic creations in a uniquely South African format.

Events like Cape Wine also enable the country to showcase its technological competence. Buyers expect that whatever they purchase will be clean, stable and fit to ship anywhere in the world. However, when the whole industry is on show, and it's clear that you can take its professionalism as a given, confidence in dealing with wine producers at the southern tip of the continent is substantially enhanced. European brokers would probably also have been delighted to discover South Africa's unique solution to sulphite-free wine. Trevor Strydom at Audacia has patented a technology that uses Rooibos instead of sulphur dioxide and has made it available free of charge to the country's producers. It's not everyone's cup to tea, so to speak. The rooibos flavour is at least as evident as the wood aromas which come from barrel-ageing. But the appeal to the growing community of consumers who want their wines with minimal chemical

intervention is significant. Add to this South Africa's status as the world's largest Fairtrade wine producer and suddenly it becomes clear that our producers are filling most of the important gaps on the spectrum.