

The dead of winter is hardly the time to be talking about white wine. Chilly weather seems to induce a craving for rich reds, Ports and concentrated, gooey muscadels. The 2016 sauvignon blancs may already be in the market (and many of the very young, zesty fresh wines are showing better than anyone predicted at the time of the harvest) but almost all of them could do with a little settling down in bottle. Not so the slightly older whites - of which the oaked wines from 2013, 2014 and 2015 are particularly splendid. This may be the time of the year when consumption patterns still tilt strongly in favour of cabernet, shiraz and pinotage, but Spring is around the corner so there's no reason to abandon white wine entirely.

What prompted this thought was a tasting of the Sumaridge Chardonnay 2014. I was at a wine show and I had already sampled a not insignificant number of current release wines. Nothing I had tried that evening was embarrassingly awful, and so far very little had even hinted at being life-changing. I had come to the Sumaridge stand for the Maritimus white blend. The vintage in the market is the 2012 and it is still remarkably youthful, crisp, concentrated, unflamboyant and - to use a much-abused word - mineral. It's a perfect wine to serve with oysters and delicate white fish - but it's not particularly striking. It's not meant to be: finesse rather than flashiness is its hallmark.

I was about to wander off in search of (hopefully) an undiscovered treasure when I saw a bottle of the Sumaridge Chardonnay 2014 in the ice-bucket. The Hemel-en-Aarde Valley enjoys a particular (and generally well-deserved) reputation for its pinot noirs, so that it is sometimes easy to forget how good its chardonnays can be. Ataraxia, Hamilton Russell, Newton Johnson, Creation, and Bouchard Finlayson produce Burgundy-style whites to rival their Burgundy-style reds. Almost as an afterthought I asked if I could sample the chardonnay.

I think it's fair to say that it stopped me in my tracks - though not at first: a little nose-shy, it didn't grab my attention until it was actually on my palate and I was tasting it. However, from that moment I realised I had found treasure. The fruit is fine, yet opulent, and it grows to almost explosive intensity in the mouth. The oak is there, but it is now perfectly integrated, adding a slight plushness to the almost silky textures of the fruit. The flavours - lime, grapefruit and faintly tropical melon notes - don't fall away, but weave themselves into a persistent, harmonious skein: it's a pretty neat wine and worth the R200+ per bottle for which it sells.

After that, it wasn't easy for me to carry on prospecting: when you've stumbled on the vinous equivalent of El Dorado, there's no compelling need to go out with your pan and shovel. But there was red wine, port and muscadel worth tracking down: the Morgenhof Cabernet 2013 - the first vintage made by Andries de Klerk - is showing more ripeness, concentration and balance than many of the earlier reds from the cellar. The Deetlefs 2012 De Hageveld - a blend comprising Bordeaux varieties as well as shiraz and pinotage - is less polished but more detailed and savoury than the cellar's more expensive Familie 2011.

On the Port front, you would have to have a serious aversion to this style of wine not to fall for the KWV Classic Collection Tawny: it's spicy, with whiffs of cinnamon and allspice, and just sufficient of the hallmark Christmas pudding notes to be utterly seductive. If you are looking for something plusher and more vibrant, buy a bottle of the Landzicht Wit Muscadel 2015: our muscadels are probably the best aromatic fortified wines produced anywhere in the world. Mostly they cost too little - so and they will vanish, as the Quagga did, for want of anyone thinking they were worth preserving.