

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 26 June 2015

There are very few important wine producing regions which lie alongside major urban agglomerations. Napa is one, the Medoc another. Santiago is central enough for visitors wishing to travel around Maipo and Casablanca in Chile. Adelaide is the nearest city to the important appellations of South Australia (though even the most civic-minded of its residents would have difficulty arguing that it's a major agglomeration.) From the perspective of a wine tourist, Cape Town (with Constantia and Durbanville in its suburbs and Stellenbosch and Paarl less than 45 minutes from the city centre) is pretty much unique.

Wine tourism is a growing industry world-wide. Visitors to Cape Town can reach these appellations with remarkable ease. Decent and well-maintained highways connect the Cape Peninsula to Paarl, Stellenbosch and the inland areas. The N2 will take you over Sir Lowry's Pass to Elgin in under an hour. A little more time behind the wheel brings Walker Bay and the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley into range. The N7, which carries traffic along the Cape's West Coast, serves the growing fashion for the wines of the Swartland. If you extend your driving time to 90 minutes from the Waterfront you can take in almost all of the country's premium wine producing regions.

Within these well-travelled routes however there remain curious lacunae. Bottelary is part of Stellenbosch but it's not on the main arterial and easily bypassed. Agter-Paarl, Tulbagh and Wellington seem more off the beaten track, though in time terms they're no further way. I visited Perdeberg recently and realised as I turned off the road at Windmeul how infrequently I drive through the rolling wheat lands (interspersed with vineyards) which lie between Durbanville and Darling. The occasion of the visit was a presentation set up by the Perdeberg cellar - consistently one of the Cape's best sources of quality chenin blanc. The winery has access to some 2500 hectares of vineyard, of which roughly 20% is dryland bush vine chenin blanc at least 20 years old (and much of it pushing 35+ years). This is a resource of inestimable value, as many of the country's top chenin producers have discovered. A significant percentage of the wine which goes into some of South Africa's leading chenin brands is crushed in the Perdeberg cellar.

Among the winery's important fruit sources are properties like Eenzaamheid and Middelberg, both of which deliver grapes for the best cuvées of Perdeberg's Dryland Collection range. I had never visited Eenzaamheid before. It is an architectural gem an hour's drive from Cape town along a country road in infinitely better condition than Oxford Road, Jan Smuts Avenue and the M1 in Johannesburg. The cheniens produced from fruit sourced from these two properties are exceptional. Perdeberg's Middelberg cuvée is one of the Cape's best current releases, while the Dryland unoaked and oaked selections (the latter won a gold medal at this year's Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show) have the intensity and finesse of wines which sell for considerably more.

However, despite their proximity to the Mother City, these properties and their wines are far from the mainstream of the premium end of the Cape wine trade. The explanation lies partly in the absence of a busy wine route (there aren't many cellars lying to the west of the N1 between Klapmuts and Wellington) and partly in the history of co-op wine production - which used to be the norm in the area.

There are very few of these co-ops still in existence: most have converted to companies and are therefore no longer obliged to crush all the fruit produced by their members. They can pick and choose, in much the same way as private producers and wholesalers.

Despite this, the taint of the old days remains. Even the most successful battle to achieve pricing commensurate with the wine quality. In this Perdeberg is no exception. However, for wine drinkers more concerned with intrinsics than brand history, it is - as the Guide Michelin would say - “worth a special journey.”