

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 27 March 2015

The news that Groot Constantia's 2013 has been judged the world's best Chardonnay (at a European competition called "Chardonnay du Monde.") comes with two givens. The first is that it's a pretty decent wine. The second is that the idea of determining - at a single competition or by any other method - that a wine is the best of its kind in the world is so patently ridiculous that anyone with enough intelligence to earn the R175 cost of a bottle would have to have drunk a case on the trot to fall for the claim.

I have no issue with properly run competitions - though, to be honest, the Office Internationale du Vin (OIV) rules, under which this and most other European competitions are managed and which preclude discussion between the judges, are seriously flawed. (If no comment is allowed between tasters, there's no proper accountability and the computer averaging the scores actually makes the determination). Show results offer wine drinkers a way of making sense of the countless labels available in the market. South Africa, for example, produces between 120 and 200 different chardonnays in any vintage. A well-stocked retail outlet will offer between 600 and 1000 different wines. This means that you will be confronted by over 50 chardonnays - a bewildering array from which to choose. If you're not walking around with a wine guide in your pocket, how can you begin to make a choice? Anything which suggests a vaguely independent quality assessment offers a way to make a qualitative sift through the selection.

This explains why the dazzling array of bottle stickers celebrating show results have become part of the merchandising of wine bottles everywhere in the world. The hyper-stores of the major UK supermarkets may list a thousand or more different wines but these represent less than 1% of the wines actually available in the UK trade and a minuscule percentage of the total number of bottled wines produced by the top twenty wine industries of the world. If, as a producer, you are "lucky" enough to get a listing at Tesco or Sainsbury's (or rich enough to buy your way onto the shelves) you are no closer to El Dorado than the punter who has bought the Lotto ticket: you're in the game but you have no guarantee that you're holding the winning number.

The 2013 Groot Constantia is a well-decorated bottle: it has a gold medal from Veritas, a Winemakers's Choice diamond award, a Terroir awards sticker and a Classic Wine trophy. These achievements have now been crowned with the Chardonnay du Monde's highest accolade. Winemaker Boela Gerber has every reason to be pleased. 826 wines were judged this year, 56 gold medals were awarded, of which only two were from South Africa (the second was the Fleur du Cap Unfiltered 2014).

Several of the gold medal wines were blanc de blanc Champagnes, one or two of which enjoy a bit of a reputation - which is more than can be said for the French still wines which garnered the lion's share of the golds. Notably absent from the list of top laureates were any Meursaults, Puligny Montrachets or Corton Charlemagnes. I have to believe that this was because their producers saw no need to enter them, and not because the panellists failed to discern their virtues.

The Groot Constantia wine is indisputably good, despite the oak still dominating the fruit: it has real weight and intensity and is clearly not meant to be taken frivolously. Chardonnay is a variety that many Cape producers handle well enough to challenge the supremacy the French enjoyed well into the second half of the 20th century. It's worth sampling the Groot Constantia - but it also makes sense to look at the other Chardonnays

coming out of the Cape: Chamonix, Bartinney, Paul Cluver, Crystallum, Jordan, Glenelly wooded and unwooded, Glen Carlou (wooded and unwooded), DeMorgenzon, Rustenberg, Iona, Richard Kershaw, Ataraxia and Mulderbosch - to name but a few.