

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - Show Results 29 May 2015

Wine competitions are a little like exams: the best (or in the context of exams, the most intelligent) don't always come out on top, but over time the competitive environment serves to sift the talent and reward the best. Precisely for this reason, not all producers enter their wines with the sole objective of winning a class or a trophy. They are interested in seeing how they shape up against their peers, they seek honest and impartial feedback on their wines, and often they use the results to help guide their pricing strategies.

When it comes to wine drinkers however, none but the most ardent of wine buffs spends any real time parsing the information readily available from almost all wine shows. Certainly there is a small class of punters for whom wine competition results are a treasure trove of arcane information to be dissected and argued over, an opportunity to interpret the data and at the same time to judge the judges. They are however in the minority: most wine drinkers want to know who won the trophies and gold medals. They hardly give anything else a second glance. Often they wait for the bottles to appear covered with medal stickers and looking like Christmas trees before they commit to any shopping.

This is a simple enough strategy - as long as they accept that not all wine shows are equal, so not all stickers carry the same weight. The results of the 2015 Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show are the latest to emerge, and mostly they make sense. It's easy enough to see that Rustenberg (which won the trophy for the best producer overall) has been rewarded for the years of effort that went into the property's renaissance. Equally, there's no surprise in Spier's high ranking with trophies for cabernet and sauvignon blanc.

Coherence in results is usually a good sign: the winner of the trophy for the show's best Chenin Blanc went to the 2014 Kleine Zalze. Last year the show awarded the 2013 vintage a gold medal - and that wine has just gone on to win the top award at this year's Concours Mondial. There are other such examples among this year's laureates - including a wine from Spier which last year was the gold medal winner in its class and this year topped the results to win the Cabernet Trophy.

But this is not the only reason to do more than simply cast an eye over the trophy and gold medal list. Interrogating the results in greater detail will reveal that, for the second year in a row, there hasn't been a gold medal in the Pinot Noir class. Since in 2014 and 2015 the judging panel included an international expert on Burgundy, it's worth asking if the expectations were simply too high, or if the judges were simply intolerant of anything which didn't fit a Burgundian aesthetic. A closer look at the results reveals that this is clearly not the case. While the same panel was not impressed with South African pinot, it was blown away by Cape Chardonnay.

Grumping about pinot is not the same as the annual flagellation of Cape merlot (which again failed to garner a gold, but at least picked up a silver). Commercially merlot is one of the most popular varieties, despite being excoriated by show judges for years. Sure, the quality has improved - but for the punters this remains largely irrelevant. The wines are generally not expensive and they appeal to consumers - so who cares what the judges think?

When it comes to pinot however, there's much more at stake. Most of the local benchmarks sell for significant amounts north of R200. If those who have been buying

them suddenly pay attention to the unequivocal message from an increasing number of experts, the bottom could well fall out of the over-oaked, lightly alcoholic, attenuated cherry and strawberry juice market.

Michael Fridjhon was Chairman of the Judges at the 2015 Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show