

You may not have heard of a wine called Bayede! - every bottle comes with an elasticised bead bracelet fitted around the neck. You would, if you were a traditional wine buyer, either not notice it or find yourself thinking that this is a marketing gimmick not unlike the straw flask packaging typical of industrial chianti. This is a bit of a pity, because the wines themselves are quite good, and have mostly been produced under the supervision of the Bayede winemaker at cellars whose standard releases are well known to the average punter. These include amongst others, Eikendal, Dewetshof, Fairview and Vergelegen - all respectable enough in their own right, and an indication that the enterprise enjoys some support from industry heavy-hitters. Bayede is one of several so-called “empowerment” brands, where established wineries have produced special cuvees for BEE-registered enterprises to facilitate transformation in an industry which is heavy on capital and light on profits.

What makes the Bayede story a little different from Seven Sisters (for example), is its link to the Zulu King whose involvement appears to be more than simply a royal warrant along the lines of “By Appointment to his Majesty...” It was his idea from the outset, and he saw it as a way of providing income to the more vulnerable members of the community - hence the beads. In the short history of Bayede some R600k has trickled down to rural households. It's not a reason in itself to buy the wine, but it is palpable evidence of an intention beyond mere production and distribution.

When the growth of the screwcap industry made it clear that the virtual monopoly enjoyed by Portugal's cork producers was under threat, vast sums were invested in a PR campaign designed to promote the “natural” values of cork, compared with the industrial nature of stelvin. Prince Charles was even moved to issue an appeal to protect the natural habitat of migratory birds which pass through Iberia's cork groves. No one leapt to the defence of little old Spanish ladies who, until the 1980s when their labour was replaced by machines, used to hand-make the fine wire bottle “baskets” which adorn many of Rioja's top wines. Bayede's bead bangles may be only slightly more useful (and could probably be made in China) - but at least they suggest that there's something more than a cut-and-paste job to the brand.

No doubt everyone who buys a bottle will be happy to consume it in a single sitting - there being enough around to spare it the monicker of “vinous rarity.” But what if you're down to the last priceless bottle in your cellar and you want to eke it out over several evenings, or share it with a number of enthusiasts not all of whom can be gathered in the same place at the same time? An American collector Greg Lamprecht who studied nuclear physics at MIT and now designs medical devices, created Coravin - a not inexpensive wine preservation system that enables you to “steal” wine through the cork of a bottle, replacing the missing fluid with inert gas. You can remove about 65% of a bottle's contents without any perceptible loss of quality, and one Coravin device can be used to access many bottles.

It's a great accessory for the by-the-glass sale of super-premium wines, and for wineries wishing to keep their top cuvees fresh for weeks (or even years) while having a sample on offer for potential customers. But the motivation for private ownership (at about R7k per unit) seemed pretty weak until I read an interview by Jancis Robinson, in which Lamprecht said “every evening I have between one and four glasses of great wine” (from different bottles). People who can afford a Coravin won't need the free beads which come with Bayede. However, if they do need a subsidy, they might appeal to the cork mafia: the device doesn't work on screw-capped bottles or on composite corks.