

In November 1995 South Africa hosted the first of what was meant to be three wine “test matches” against Australia. The competition, sponsored by SAA, was called “The Shield” and it was conceived during the course of a trip to Chile in January of that year by a group comprising John Platter, James Halliday (doyen of Australian wine writers), Lynne Sherriff MW and me. Halliday had been involved in two similar competitions pitting Australia against California, both of which the Antipodeans had won by a handsome margin.

The South African wine industry was just emerging from a period of prolonged isolation. Demand for Cape wine in the early years of the Mandela presidency exceeded producer expectations, as well as their ability to meet the quality standards of the fine wine market. We all recognised that unless something was done to shock wineries out of the euphoria induced by unprecedented demand, South Africa would condemn itself - in the eyes of the world - to being a producer of cheap-and-cheerful plonk. A competition against Australia - at the time the most successful New World wine exporter - offered two obvious benefits. Any wines which performed well would be catapulted onto the world stage. However, given the certainty that the Cape would fail to live up to the elevated assumptions of the Old Guard responsible for running the industry, the event promised an essential and timely wake-up call.

To say it fulfilled these expectations is to dramatically understate the position. The 78 - 21 drubbing of the cream of the country's wines produced a tidal wave of anger and resentment (much of it directed at me) from the senior players in the industry. However it also sent the more open-minded and youthful “cellar rats” off on a quest to learn from the world's best. The immediate result was that the Boere-mafia got together, persuaded SAA to cancel the sponsorship and brought the idea of international wine test matches involving South Africa to an abrupt end.

Fast forward a few years and the good citizens of Cowra in Australia decided to host a three-way Chardonnay challenge (Australia, New Zealand and South Africa). I was invited to be the South African judge - a position which came with more downside risk from a Cape wine industry perspective than a swim through the shark-infested waters of False Bay. Much to everyone's surprise (including my own) South Africa romped home the comfortable winner (and it was the chance of the Australians to excoriate those who had jeopardised national pride).

Five years later the CEO of the Australian Boutique Wine Association proposed a Tri-Nations “test match” across several categories - to be hosted annually in Sydney. The event has not merely survived: it has flourished, evolving over the past thirteen years from the original three to five and now six nations, with Chile, Argentina and the US now on board. Its results (from a South African perspective) are so vastly different from the dark days of The Shield that it's hard to imagine we are talking about the same Cape wine industry. The 2015 edition was judged a few weeks ago (with award details only available in October). However, the statistics which have been released reveal the transformation of the New World wine scene.

New Zealand emerged victorious, winning five of the 16 trophies. South Africa, with four, had the second highest trophy count (last year we tied with the Kiwis). The US garnered three, Chile two and Australia and Argentina had to be content with one each. The situation was little different when it came to who dominated the various classes, South Africa pretty much owning the white wine categories. The real fall from grace has been Australia: the sometime juggernaut still has tremendous depth of talent, but little

of the cutting edge excitement. This comes at a bad time for the competition's hosts with their trophy cabinet already showing a gaping space left by the Ashes Urn.