

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 5 June 2015

A vertical tasting - which reviews the same wine over a number of vintages - is a surprisingly useful way of deciding whether or not you would consider buying the current release from a particular cellar. By seeing how previous vintages have evolved you can usually anticipate the future of the latest arrival: in gene pool terms, if you know the track record of several generations of race horses, you can make a more informed judgement call at a yearling sale.

Of course there are limitations - both to vertical tastings and to bloodline projections. Every generation is different because the DNA of both parents is present in their offspring. With wine, differences from one year to the next can range from weather conditions and vinification strategies to fruit selection within a single site, or from wholly different vineyards.

Nick van Huyssteen and Dewaldt Heyns - proprietor and winemaker at Saronsberg respectively - hosted a vertical tasting of the first ten vintages of their flagship wine, the Saronsberg Full Circle, in late May. Full Circle has been a work in progress, conceptualised shortly after Van Huyssteen bought the Tulbagh farm, but in a constant state of evolution as new vineyards planted specially for the blend come into production. For the earlier examples, Heyns had to rely mainly upon bought-in grapes. Now that his own plantings are contributing - and he can also make more of the Rhone varieties like mourvedre and grenache which were in very short supply ten years ago - the composition of Full Circle is not the same as it was at the beginning of the decade.

I have to say that I, for one, am pleased about this. I was never a great fan of the early releases. I found them too big and overtly too alcoholic. Hovering at around 15% they delivered ripeness (plenty of it) but without nuance. Ten years on they've mellowed, though without acquiring any intricacy (though age has given the 2004 polish and an attractive opulence). Generally the more recent vintages gave me more pleasure. The 2008 was a standout wine, especially given the weather difficulties at the time. It speaks for Heyns's focus in terms of what he permitted to go into the blend. The 2010 is exceptional, the 2011 still youthful but very promising, while the 2013 looks like it will reward your patience - if you have sufficient of that attribute to age it for at least a decade.

At much the same time I was lucky enough to do a horizontal tasting (in other words, the current releases of the range) from Neil Ellis. This was less about where Neil Ellis has come from and more about what the future holds. The recent acquisition of old vine cabernet, shiraz, sauvignon blanc vineyards as well as long-term contracts for grenache and cinsault coincides with Neil's sons and daughter taking over the day-to-day running of the cellar.

It's evident from what I tasted (especially of the whites) that there's been a change of hand at the tiller - neither better nor worse, just different. If you feel like shopping, you could do a lot worse than buy the unwooded and wooded sauvignon, the grenache and the cinsault. They are pure, thoughtfully managed, youthful and capable of acquiring even greater charm with bottle-age. However, the real excitement for me was the pending release of the cellar's ultra-premium offering, a cabernet-shiraz blend bearing the very simple name of Webb-Ellis (Neil's wife's maiden name was Webb - a convenient coincidence in the year of Rugby World Cup). Intense and concentrated, though still fresh and detailed, the Webb-Ellis 2010 is at least ten years off its prime. Produced in

tiny quantities and destined to sell for around R1000 per bottle, it's not your everyday braai wine. It joins an elite club of highly priced "statement" wines from the Cape - though this one at least may actually be worth what the producer is asking for it.