

The term “mainstream” comes with a great deal of baggage. For a start, there's an implication that everything which isn't “mainstream” is marginal - unless of course you put individualism ahead of convention, in which case you excoriate those seduced by the big brand sound. If you're Anti-Establishment, you're attracted to the fringe, seeking hard-to-find rather than in-your-face. If, however, you are invested in what lies along the highways rather than the byways, you're inclined to believe that the opposite of mainstream is simply nerdy.

It's nearly impossible to find common ground between these two positions in the world of wine: if you fancy yourself a wine geek, you dare not mention that you drank - let alone enjoyed - a bottle of Nederburg or even Diemersdal. You're not supposed to mention anything produced outside the Swartland and in volumes exceeding the contents of a 228 litre barrel. It would be tantamount to a whisky buff confessing to a penchant for Bourbon or the occasional dram of something blended.

Inevitably there's drinking pleasure to be found on both sides of this seemingly unbridgeable divide, as well as much which doesn't fall easily into either camp. Take the De Trafford wines for example. Simply because David Trafford has been making boutique quantities of fine wine for longer than most fringe winemakers have been alive doesn't mean his enterprise is any less relevant. As if to prove the point, his venture in Malgas (called Sjinn, after the name given to the region at the mouth of the Breede River by the original Khoi inhabitants), offers several thoughtfully composed wines from less-than-mainstream varieties, like touriga nacional, trincadeira, and mourvedre. The 2012 Sjinn Red is fine and savoury, more restrained and less opulent than the De Trafford style. The Sjinn Viognier 2014 is just as unflashy, but it has the peachy purity of a very credible Northern Rhone wine.

Spioenkop is another such example: all the wines are thoughtfully crafted, and even though the cultivars that Koen Roose-Vandenbroucke and his wife Hannelore work with are those which perform best in the less rustic environment of Elgin, the wines have the distinctive stamp of personality about them. There are two ranges - the “1900” which includes bought-in fruit and the estate range - which is exactly that. Once a producer is using fruit sourced from outside the appellation the impact of the winemaker must exceed the part played by origin. When the two reinforce each other - site and winemaker's influence - the results can be extraordinary. The two different estate chenin blancs, one from the lower altitude shale soils (Johanna Brandt) and the other from the slightly higher altitude ferricrete terraces (Sarah Raal) are utterly different. The former is softer, earthier, the latter, leaner, limier, more austere. Incidentally, the estate Riesling 2016, estate Sauvignon Blanc 2014 and the estate Pinotage 2016 are all worth tracking down: they have an authenticity and a poise which reflects both place and winemaking philosophy.

All this and more could be said about Leon Coetzee's Fledge & Company wines. Most are site specific - he tracks down parcels of grapes, often from old blocks, many from the most unlikely places, and puts them together in a restrained but carefully thought out manner. The fruit for his Hoeksteen Chenin comes from from an old bush-vine vineyard in Stellenbosch; his Klipspringer Chenin from bush-vines in the Swartland. The Katvis Pinot Noir 2015 is different: here Coetzee draws on three sites: Elgin, Tradouw and (amazingly) Klein Karoo. The end result is impressive: spicy black cherry notes, textured but not heavy, refined and slow evolving. While there's nothing nerdy about these wines, they couldn't be further from mainstream. They prove that there's a great deal of territory between these seemingly extreme positions, and they expose the fiction which

drives the “purists” of both camps. Take away the soap-box and there are only two kinds of wines: those that are worth drinking, and those which aren't.