

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 6 February 2015

I used to be rude about Sauvignon Blanc - but that was in the bad old days when most of what was produced in the Cape had a taste and mouthfeel reminiscent of pool acid. Winemakers in that era, fearful that they would miss optimum fruit ripeness, elected to err on the side of under-ripe, or to hedge their bets by bringing in their grapes in several tranches. The latter strategy (one third under-ripe, one third ripe, one third over-ripe) followed the unassailable logic that if you have one foot in a block of ice and the other in boiling water you are, on average, comfortable.

A great deal has changed since then. Producers are more adept at reading true ripeness levels. The vast swathes of poorly sited sauvignon blanc vineyards are not part of the fine wine equation. New - cooler - sites have been developed. Fruit handling has become more precise and the whole management of flavour-sensitive varieties has improved immeasurably. Much of this is due to the work that Charles Hopkins (chairman of the South African National Wine Show and cellar master at De Grendel) has done in sharing the latest technical research with his colleagues.

Winemakers now know that excessive harsh green fruit notes (produced by a fruit compound called methoxypyrazine) are considered a fault, just as the bound sulphur whiffs (classed as thiols) responsible for the often unattractive sweaty aromas are equally undesirable. Courtesy of Hopkins's obsession with quality control, they are also learning that abdicating their bottling arrangements to mobile contractors who operate without meaningful quality control protocols is certifiably insane. All the care which goes into creating pure, honest wine can (and often is) destroyed by an inadequately sterilised bottling line, dirty filters, and a complete disregard for potentially problematic issues such as dissolved oxygen. Since by far the majority of premium Sauvignons are closed with screwcaps - so cork contamination is no longer a convenient scapegoat - bottling errors are becoming ever more obvious.

There are however some estates where you could pretty much take for granted that every Sauvignon vintage would be on the money. Cape Point is one such property, so too is Diemersdal (lately even more so) while Buitenverwachting, Thelema, Lomond and Southern Right hardly ever let you down. I've also always liked the Sauvignons which Johan Kruger at Sterhuis produces with unerring regularity. A recent tasting which began with his 2014 and included a back vintage (2010) followed by his Chardonnay and Astra white blend before moving on to his reds really served to highlight how exciting - and well priced - his range is.

The young sauvignon is tight but not lean, with a fresh lime note lifted by delicate honey-suckle whiffs. The 2010 has filled out in the middle - confirming yet again that sauvignons from properly sited vineyards can be truly age-worthy. Sterhuis is home to several really old white wine blocks: the sauvignon blanc is 28 years old, and is planted entirely to the original weerstasie clone (which yields a less plush, more mineral style wine). There is also a 26 year old Chardonnay vineyard and a 45 year old chenin block (which should be a national treasure).

The finely nuanced Astra blend is assembled from the farm's oldest white wine vineyards while the sumptuous Chardonnay (which also has great ageing potential) also reflects the value of ancient vines. One of the Cape's rock star ultra-garagiste winemakers gets much of what he needs to produce his unobtainable and highly priced cuvée from this Bottelary site.

While Merlot has taken over from Sauvignon as the South African variety about which it is easiest to be rude, Kruger's 2010 is among very few which invite unequivocal enthusiasm. As an added benefit, all of the Sterhuis wines are under-priced - starting with a Chenin blanc (which retails for under R70) to a long lees-aged bubbly for which you will need to pay a little over double that amount.