

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day - 6 March 2015

An old (but not dodder) wine merchant in the UK once highlighted for me the changes which had taken place in the trade during his lifetime. "When I started we hardly sold anything except Champagne, Cru Classé wines from the Medoc, Port and Sherry. Burgundy we bought in bulk and 'fixed up' in our own cellars," he said. "Now our customers want wines from other parts of France, from California, Australia, South Africa - in fact, from the whole damn world. It's impossible to keep up," he muttered.

He wasn't wrong: for years the trade was pretty simple: you needed to know a great deal about the 60 or so Cru Classé clarets, a little about the Right Bank reds, a smattering about your customers preferences in what they fondly imagined was Burgundy, a half a dozen Champagne Houses (many of which produced no more than three cuvées). The fine wine world hardly extended beyond that.

Things weren't vastly different in South Africa. Forty years ago there were less than 200 local labels readily available to inland retailers, wines which didn't purport to come from Paarl and Stellenbosch went into the high volume jug business, and no one really cared about the latest vinous discovery. The first commercial vintage of Kanonkop was 1973, and of Meerlust 1975.

Things have become way more exotic since then. Last week I visited the Abingdon Estate in KZN - just a little inland from Howick: it is a real producer of real KZN wine. This may come as something of a surprise to people who remember the shenanigans which were the defining feature of the Van Niekerk's operation at The Stables (before they found it more lucrative to do cosy deals with the Provincial Government).

Ian, Jane and now daughter Laurie Smorthwaite have been growing vines in this most unlikely appellation for more than a decade. The altitude (1150 metres) of their site means that it is cooler than most people would expect. Longer hang-times and more gradual ripening conditions translate into delicious and surprisingly low alcohol wines. The problem of summer rainfall, with the risks to the phytosanitary condition of the grapes, is not a problem unique to KZN. Bordeaux has it, so does Burgundy and so does the Hunter Valley. It's easily solved, if you're hard working and meticulous: anti-fungal sprays, applied with religious fervour until a few weeks before the harvest, keep the grapes as healthy as they would be in Stellenbosch or Robertson.

Everything which comes from the Abingdon cellar is genuinely hand-crafted: the Methode Traditionelle fizz, for example, is disgorged by hand, one bottle at a time. The crop is counted in bottles rather than dozens (15000 in a good year) and the range reflects care and thoughtfulness, rather than crass commercialism. There are several standout wines: a sauvignon blanc with lovely aromas of dried pear and lime blossom, a sparkling wine showing the classic baked bread notes of bottle fermentation, a savoury red blend (called the First Decade) made from cabernet and shiraz and a fabulously peachy viognier which picked up a medal at the Decanter World Wine Awards last year.

There are no tricks to it: they know every vine - they planted them themselves, and they wrap them in netting every year to save the fruit from the depredations of birds. Once they transplanted an entire chardonnay vineyard, vine by vine, to a better site, two years after its initial establishment. They sell everything out of the tasting room within weeks of release. Pricing is premium but not out of line.

They do most of the work themselves, getting up at 4h30 to harvest, and de-juicing in an old-fashioned (but very gentle) basket press. There's no time for exotic travel over the growing season: Ian watches the weather like a glider pilot. However, to the astonishment of the industry, he's proved you can make a living from three hectares of vineyard - indirectly teaching producers in the Cape a salutary lesson in self-sufficiency.