

It's impossible to approach a bottle of wine without an element of prejudgement, if not prejudice. To the extent that you know - or think you know - something about the producer, you are likely to have an opinion on the merits of the winemaking. Everyone has views on the virtues (or otherwise) of grape varieties. It seems obvious that a pure judgement requires a blind tasting. However, if a wine is completely unsighted, you are faced with contextual difficulties: how can you judge a blend if you know nothing about its component parts? You might think you have picked up the cassis and lead pencil notes of the cabernet, the plummier nuances of merlot - but you could also be misdirecting yourself. When it comes to potential, how can you tell what the future holds if you have no idea about the age of what's in the bottle? If tasting a wine is reduced to a totally unsighted experience, you are certainly freed from the burden of prejudgement, but you are also deprived of the information you need to fully appreciate what's in your glass.

While I try to do all my tasting and scoring blind, I allow myself basic information about the variety or blend. That way I eliminate the marketing message of the label, and my own prejudices about producers. Accordingly, when I see an upward trend in my scores over an extended period, I assume the producer in question has been investing in the vineyards and cellar. This was certainly the conclusion I came to when I reviewed my latest notes on Franschoek's Rickety Bridge.

Up to the cellar's 2011 vintage, my scores hovered around 70 - indicating good commercial wine - safe enough to order in a restaurant. My next round of tastings saw a move to the high 70s, with the Foundation Stone white 2013 garnering 78. Then, a month or two ago the ultra premium Paulina's Reserve Cabernet 2013 picked up an 84 - putting it in the top 10% of my 2016 tastings. Shortly after that the 2015 Paulina's Reserve Chenin Blanc came in at 83 while the 2013 Semillon scored 90 - making it one of my highest rated wines of the year.

With evidence that Rickety Bridge has really upped its game, it came as a surprise to discover that there have been no dramatic upheavals at the farm. The winemaker, Wynand Grobler, has been there since 2007 and the property has had the same owner since 2000. When I asked Grobler if he could explain the marked improvement, he was disarmingly diffident in his response. He said that it had taken time to understand what the property has to offer, and to incorporate these insights in his winemaking. Some of the improvements have come from vineyard management strategies - which are gradual and progressive - but others from carefully considered decisions around which coopers to use, what instructions to give them in terms of barrel-toasting, and then how long to leave the wines maturing in those casks. "I've become much more conscious of how to preserve purity and integrity through the wooding process," is how he described it.

What is certain is that these seemingly small tweaks have made a substantial difference. When I look at my note (from a blind tasting) on the 2013 Semillon, it is clear that the fruit has been more sensitively handled, and that the wood has played a key role in supporting, rather than interfering with it. "Beautifully integrated oak and fruit aromas, faint vanilla whiffs melding with waxy lanolin and grilled hazelnut notes. Surprisingly fresh on the palate, still with an almost edgy tang, softened by overall roundness on the palate, savoury and persistent."

Golfers would understand a vastly different outcome from an almost identical process: two rounds played on the same course, different weather conditions, a different energy. One produces a trophy, the other isn't good enough to make the cut.