

A few weeks ago the Back family of Backsberg celebrated their centenary on the estate. While there are many older properties in South Africa, one hundred years is a meaningful period for single family to have managed a wine business successfully. Keeping such an operation across a number of generations has become an increasingly difficult enterprise. The complexity of the business, the capital requirements, and the sheer pressure of performing in a hugely competitive international environment all contribute to making succession difficult to manage. It was much easier in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: there were few enough alternatives, and the farming life at least offered relative security and a reasonably consistent income. As long as you were vaguely competent, not overly profligate, and not plagued by bad luck, agriculture was a pretty solid existence.

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wine-farming became progressively easier, as the KWV, mandated to keep the white farmers happy and secure, guaranteed producers a fixed income for their grape crop and spared them the hurly burly of the wine trade. However, it was never going to last: agricultural socialism (protecting white farmers at the expense of consumers) came to an end after 1994. This was an eventuality the Back family seems to have anticipated pretty much from the outset: their farming model wasn't built on handouts.

The property was purchased by Michael Back's grandfather in 1916. He had arrived from Lithuania as a penniless immigrant some years previously. Working as a labourer he was able to accumulate sufficient capital over time to be able to open a butchery in Paarl. The story goes that one day someone walked into his shop and offered to sell him the farm - which in those days was planted mainly to fruit trees. Later he acquired several properties, including Fairview which is now owned and run by Michael's cousin Charles.

Michael's father Sydney went into the wine business as soon as he had completed his education. This wasn't the glorified trade we think of today, and for much of his adult life Sydney ran a small but successful blending and bottling business called "Back's Wines" whose stock in trade ran from sweet wines and muscadels to Ginger Liqueur and Vanderhum. In 1969 Sydney sold Back's Wines and made the brave and risky decision to go into what was the early era of the estate wine trade. At the time there were very few independent producers supplying wines directly to consumers - mainly because the major wholesalers threatened to boycott any growers who sold wine to retailers or to private customers.

In January 1973 the South African wine of origin legislation became law, and with that the concept of estate wine. In addition to establishing and protecting the idea of origin, it also governed the regulations determining varietal integrity. By the late 1970s there was a growing number of independent producers who had successfully defied the big merchants. The major wine routes were well established and wine tourism had started to play a meaningful role in the economy of the Western Cape. With annual wine sales in excess of 130 dozen, Backsberg had become the largest estate wine cellar in South Africa.

Following his father's death in 1996, Michael Back took over the business. By then it was clear that both the wines and the business model were in need of a refreshment and modernisation. The better part of the past two decades (during which I was briefly involved as a consultant) were invested this transition, maintaining the brand message, but taking it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In an age when big wineries are unfashionable, and the wine bloggers are constantly looking for something new (preferably produced in tiny quantities and sold on allocation from the moment the wine has gone to bottle), Backsberg stands a monument to the vision, hard work and integrity of the family which transformed an unprepossessing Paarl fruit farm into a household name in the South African wine industry.