

Business Day, 22 April 2016

For those who regard the half full/half empty glass definition of optimism/pessimism as painfully clichéd, the world of wine offers a fresher benchmark: it resides in the regret or elation experienced following the discovery of how much seemingly ordinary good wine is available. For the optimist this is a sign of the generosity of the universe, something to be celebrated, for which to give profound thanks. The grumpy pessimist on the other hand sees this as an endless vista filled with the mundane and pedestrian, a sea of mediocrity, a featureless landscape unworthy of his attention.

Producers generally don't aim to make good (but ordinary) wine and they expect the fruit of their endeavours to finish in the highest rank of scores. Like parents who know in advance that their unborn children will become Nobel laureates, most winemakers believe every bottle they produce should be adorned with medal stickers. Any score to the contrary is treated as proof of the incompetence of the judge. A succession of such show results is greeted with stories of how Van Gogh never sold a painting in his lifetime: discernment of true genius, after all, is more a task for the arbitration of eternity than for the contemporary critic.

However, wines which score 75 points and upwards on my scale range from very good to (as they cross the 90 mark) world class and extraordinary. Clearly not all sub-95 wines should be disregarded. On the contrary, they are where the bulk of the country's best known and most highly regarded bottlings rightly reside. South African cellars produce over 7000 different wines each year. Fewer than 70 are ever going to be extraordinary, and many of these will take several years to reveal their full potential. It's hardly a cause for embarrassment or chagrin if your best effort hasn't made the cut in a game that's as competitive as this. (It's also worth recording that all such judgements are a matter of opinion, some better informed and better schooled than others, but hardly etched in tablets of stone, just the same.)

So to record that the Bosman Steen Cap Classique scored 78 and that it's a fine dry bubbly with a delicate mousse, restrained apricot aromas, creamy on the palate and with a tangy lemon twist to the finish is not a contradiction: it's delicious and well made, but it's not Krug or Cristal. Likewise the Kleine Zalze Vintage Brut (which scored 82) is already showing the biscuity notes that come from long lees ageing. Good wine, and worth its price - just not life-changing. The Cap Classiques from Le Lude all score around the 80 mark, with the Rose at 83 leading the charge. Le Lude is a small and wholly MCC-focused producer whose wines are only now being released. It's a name that will come to mean a lot in the world of Cap Classique once there are more aged wines in the cellar.

By the same token, the 78 points that the Porcupine Ridge Chardonnay 2014 picked up makes it a fabulous buy at around R50 per bottle. The wine is showing a little development, so it's not just citrus and zest, but grilled hazelnut and grapefruit on the nose and palate. Allee Bleu's 2014 Pinotage is a pretty neat wine - and deserving of its 81 points. The L'Avenir Single Block Pinotage on 80 is an equally good buy. Neither are show stoppers, but then wines are produced to be drunk, not to win awards by clubbing wine judges to death.

In the same spirit - you could do a lot worse than to buy the 2013 Zonnebloem Laureat: a Bordeaux blend with delicate red fruit, plum aromas and savoury tannins. It's the kind of red wine made to be enjoyed, not to be left in some dark corner of your cellar until it's fallen off its perch. We need more of these, and fewer massively oaked masterpieces that inspire fear and admiration, but fail to deliver pleasure.

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