

Business Day, 13 May 2016

In the days when John Platter wrote his eponymous guide, his wife Erica had the thankless task of editing the text. Until the 1990s John still did all of the tasting. However, as the number of producers began increasing when the era of isolation drew to a close, he shared the burden with a few of us. Briefing sessions ahead of the annual tasting marathon were largely conducted by Erica - who wanted to make sure that we toed the line when it came to the Guide's rules of Winespeak. I recall a particularly intense discussion around the term "mouthfeel." As far as Erica was concerned, it was irrelevant to readers of the Guide.

It was an interesting debate, and one which has become increasingly apposite. Wine, after all, is as much subject to fashion as any other consumer commodity. Twenty years ago the focus was much more on aroma, and on the taste sensations of sweet, sour, salt and bitter. Nowadays mouthfeel has become mainstream: some wines are more viscous than others, tannins can be coarse and grainy, or fine and powdery. You are more likely to read tasting notes which focus of texture now than we were writing reviews for the guide two decades ago. In fact, if you put a bunch of 21st century wine geeks into a room with a line-up of samples, they will probably gravitate towards the wines which have a marked palate appeal at the expense of the more aromatic examples. I recently overheard a discussion among judges assessing a line-up of sauvignon blancs. One of the tasters complained that the wines were all "so pure and crisp and clean - boring."

This shift to mouthfeel is producing a whole new wine culture in South Africa. Many of the more garagiste-type offerings are built on texture, some even with a conscious attempt to make them less overtly aromatic. I recently sampled two wines made by Craig Sheard (who does business under the name of Elemental Bob and sells a tiny production of red and white wines under the My Cosmic Hand brand). I was struck by the quality of the mouthfeel of both the white blend and the Pinot Noir. Although Craig's tasting note (on the white blend - viognier, chenin, verdelho and semillon) mentions "ginger and white pepper" it continues with "not too lean or too thick in texture and possessing lovely freshness, mineral to salty, alluring finish. A real succulence upfront before a nice pithy quality to the finish." It's quite clear that for him the way the wine feels on the palate is crucial. The same is true of his note on the pinot noir: "light-bodied but not too lean texture and possessing lovely fruit purity and freshness."

His production methods reveal exactly how he has worked towards that objective. Wild yeasts, whole bunch pressing, old barrels (to minimise oak tannins and overt oak aromas) lees stirring - these are all strategies designed to enhance mouthfeel and even - such as with the decision to use old oak - to minimise primary aromas. They ensure that the wines are individualistic but not flamboyant, savoury rather than juicy, vinous rather than fruity. Since this is not the only way to make wine, the approach polarises opinions among consumers. For those who are looking for aromatic pungency and purity they are not striking enough; for those tired of primary fruit they are a boon.

The battle-lines may not be the usual New World (primary fruit) Old World (mouthfeel) one. It is increasingly obvious that the issues come down to method of production, making this another aspect of the craft versus mainstream debate. It's more difficult (at least at present) for high-tech industrial wineries to micro-manage the processes which deliver the savoury and sometimes elusive textures which have become the defining feature of artisan wines. Increasingly "mouthfeel" is a coded message which tells the intended recipients that the wine has been "hand-made."

Michael Fridjhon