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It's one of those conundrums about wine: does the site-specific, terroir-driven example trump the bottle where the winemaker has an infinite choice of fruit sources? On the one side are the so-called terroirists, obsessed with origin and the role that it plays in defining the end result. Against them is the "best possible raw materials" argument. It's a given that, in this head-to-head, the best winemaking strategies are applied. In international terms it sets wines like La Romanée - the smallest of the great Burgundian grand crus - against New World classics like Penfold's Grange. In South Africa it would be a Kanonkop Black Label Pinotage against Boekenhoutskloof Syrah.

Consumers of terroir-based wines don't always fully interrogate the question of origin. They assume the fruit always comes from the exact same vineyards. However, for example, at the great Medoc estates (ostensibly single origin properties) there are many vineyards. Depending on vintage, different sections or even a dramatically different mix of varieties goes into the Grand Vin, with the remaining blocks used to produce the second label.

By the same token, even where the fruit is bought in (Grange or Boekenhoutskloof) there's usually a great deal of continuity. Penfolds has intermittently used Magill Vineyard grapes for Grange since Max Schubert first conceived of the wine. Marc Kent has been buying Shiraz for Boekenhoutskloof from a grower in Wellington pretty much since his original Somerset West vineyards was grubbed up after the 1997 vintage.

The opportunity of tasting - on two consecutive days - vertical line-ups of Epicurean, a multi-regional blend produced at Rupert & Rothschild for a partnership consisting of Mbhazima Shilowa and friends, and Morgenster, from Giulio Bertrand's Somerset West estate established in 1700, seemed an ideal opportunity of putting the two apparently contradictory positions to the test.

The Epicurean was launched with the 2003 vintage as a cabernet-dominated blend but morphed over time into a wine where merlot holds sway. The apparent reason for this decision is that additional quality merlot fruit became available. As a result, the recent vintages are more accessible than the earlier ones were on release - though older examples are ageing beautifully. I was particularly impressed with the 2004, the 2005 and the 2008 (the last-mentioned being perhaps the best wine I have tasted from that generally gawky and unattractive vintage).

At Morgenster - where all the fruit for the red wines is harvested on the Somerset West estate - there has been a comparable shift from cabernet to merlot in the cellar's Grand Vin (Morgenster Reserve) with a symmetrical inversion in the Lourens River Valley red to a more cabernet-based red. The reason, we were told at the recent launch of the 2012 vintage, was the palpable quality of the property's merlot and the propensity of the cabernets to show herbal, green notes.

There's no doubt that this stylistic shift has proved popular with the punters. The early accessibility of the plusher, creamier merlot relieves all but the most old-fashioned wine buffs of any need to cellar the Morgenster (Grand Vin). Strangely, however, whatever leafy notes there may have been in the Cabernet are perfectly concealed in the latest (2012) Lourens River red, making it a fabulous buy for classicists. As a result I can't help feeling that more cabernet, and especially more cabernet franc, would add value to the Grand Vin in the long term. Anyone lucky enough (or rich enough - since almost all are available from the estate's vinoteque) to sample the earlier vintages will see how closely they resemble a Cru Classe Bordeaux.

Giulio Bertrand, who bought the property almost 25 years ago when he was in his mid-60s, is now in his 90th year. At the launch event he was as youthful and enthusiastic as ever, describing his plans to extend the plantings of his Italian Collection varieties - a project which will take another decade to bear suitable fruit. Clearly, when it comes to great wine, it's better to take the long view.

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