

## Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 1 August 2014

For punters of “authentic wine” the importance of site is paramount. Even though science cannot fully explain why one piece of dirt produces better fruit than another, there is enough empirical evidence to show that over time some vineyards yield quality wines which have a consistent smell and taste to them. In other words, provenance alone accounts for the discernible aesthetic uniqueness of the end product. This is why a skilled blind taster, presented with a line-up of ten vintages each of Romanee-Conti and La Tache, will sort them correctly in terms of origin - even though the two vineyards are 100m apart and the wines are made by the same cellar master, in the same winery, from the same varieties, and are aged in casks from the same oak sources and the same coopers.

When South Africa's wine of origin laws were promulgated just over 40 years ago the smallest certifiable plot was the estate itself, and for wines to obtain the requisite estate seal the fruit had to be harvested from the demarcated property and vinified on site. (As an aside, in those early days, estates could be made up of non-contiguous tracts of land, so an estate certification was no guarantee of provenance in the narrow sense of the word.) The law did not recognise the concept of a single vineyard, so there was little incentive for producers to manage the grapes from each block separately and to discover whether some yielded wines with their own particular aesthetic coherence.

The legislation has changed over time. With improved opportunities of linking the final wine to an identifiable and demarcated site more and more producers are offering vineyard-specific special releases. This has not always been clear on the label, and consumers could be forgiven for thinking that Schaapenberg on a Vergelegen label was simply a sub-brand, or that Merindol at Simonsig was a named cuvee - like the Frans Malan. Learning and understanding the distinction will require time. It's taken Burgundy centuries to develop its arcane nomenclature and even regional specialists sometimes have difficulty distinguishing between a producer's sub-brand, a “lieu-dit” and a site protected by the laws of Appellation Controlee.

Stellenzicht's Guy Webber has been on a roadshow to launch the property's single vineyard syrah, a wine which goes under the curious (but not inaccurate) name of “Plum Pudding Hill.” It's origins go back to the legendary 1994, produced by Andre van Rensburg mainly from a single site which (anecdotally, at any rate) was omitted from the harvest schedule and only remembered some days later when the grapes were 'super-ripe'. The resulting wine was pungently aromatic, with a distinctive plum-pudding aroma. It literally took the world by storm, beating the iconic Penfold's Grange in several blind tastings and competitions and elevating the image of South African red wine just as our post-apartheid exports were penetrating international markets.

The 1997 vintage followed a similar trajectory though - at least in my opinion - it lacked the freshness and concentration of the 1994. It was however indisputably a pea from the same pod, as indeed were subsequent vintages (including the less showy but better ageing 1999 and the blockbuster 2001 - a monster of a wine at almost 16% alcohol.) Put any of the Stellenzicht Syrahs in a line-up and you will see they have a sameness and coherence about them, notwithstanding vintage variation and the personality differences of the two winemakers who have been vinifying fruit from the property's 'Plum Pudding Hill' for the past two decades.

In short, the case for creating a single-site wine at Stellenzicht is indisputable. While the

2007 Plum Pudding Hill may appear to be the first release in this particular category, it has long and established antecedents. Like its predecessors, it's an acquired taste. I prefer my Shirazes fresher and less blowsy, but for punters who like what has come to be known as the South-eastern Australian style, rather than Northern Rhone, it's the obvious "add to basket."