

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 14 November 2014

Andrea and Chris Mullineux have enjoyed a meteoric rise in the world of Cape wine. Twelve years ago, while still completing his under-graduate studies, Chris began working at Tulbagh Mountain Vineyards, planting the vines and establishing the winery. He was joined there by Andrea and together they made the property's first vintages - to much critical acclaim. When the property was sold in 2008, the Mullineuxs set up their own small cellar in Kloof Street in Riebeeck-Kasteel. Six years later it was the Platter Guide's Winery of the Year, with four 5 star wines in the 2014 edition to go with the seven 5 star awards garnered from their previous submissions.

The top end of the wine market is always a precarious place to inhabit. No matter how good you are, no matter how meticulous your selection, no matter how modestly you accept the accolades, everyone is out to get you. For a start, you set the benchmark for others to outperform. Twenty years ago Gyles Webb and Thelema dominated the awards, bagging Diners Club and the SAA selections with monotonous regularity. Without any decline in the standard of what was on offer (and in fact with constant, though not always hugely visible, improvement), Thelema has faded from the front-of-mind space it enjoyed in the late 1990s. Notwithstanding Gyles's engaging good humour, his self-deprecating modesty, the complete absence of a sense of entitlement, the punters wanted another hero.

Some of this is about fashion, about the perceived value of novelty over consistent performance. It does not matter that the 2010 Cabernet (the current release) is delicious and accessible, or that the Rabelais blend gets better and better. (Both the 2009 and 2010 added a Platter 5 star to the cellar's accolades). The trade moves on and even the most competent and adept find life at the pinnacle lonely and life-threatening.

So here we have the Mullineuxs in the same high-risk space - every wine good in its own right, and some cuvées extraordinary by any standard. Their business model has some built-in safety features: a relatively new partner (Analjit Singh, who brought his Franschoek properties into the equation) to provide financial stability, low enough volumes to ensure the cellar is not enslaved to the commerce of wine. This balance is crucial - especially with overwhelming demand and limited vineyard ownership (much of the top fruit is contracted, though the winery team often manages the viticulture). Without this independence it's often impossible for producers to resist the temptation to release the high priced cuvées even when the fruit isn't good enough to make the cut.

Chris and Andrea Mullineux are very conscious of these dangers. Their Kloof Street range is designed to provide value wines for those of the cellar's followers who also want good everyday drinking. At R80 for the white and R90 for the red, they are arguably under-priced. They prefer it this way - they don't want them to become the statement of their aesthetic vision, or a distraction from their primary objective, which is a focus on site-specificity. In a way, this forces them to make all the components of the more premium Mullineux range work for the wines and for the business.

Essentially here the cellar offers a generic Swartland syrah (R240) and a blended white (R190). There's far less of these Mullineux-branded wines than the Kloof Street offering, but significantly more than the single site wines (syrah and chenin - defined in terms of the soils/geology of the vineyards). Purists may want to chase down the Schist or Granite Syrah - of which typically 100 cases of each are produced each year, and which sell for about R675 per bottle. For my money however, the blends - which optimise the

best features from these often wildly diverse locations - make for a better drink. I can't think of many Northern Rhone syrahs to match the 2012 Mullineux that's just been released, and certainly not at less than three times the price.