

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 15 August 2014

It is generally believed that a sighted wine judging environment favours better known producers (whose reputations obviously precede them). If you know you are looking at a vinous classic, so the logic goes, you are more likely to award it the points appropriate to its perceived status. Even if the wine is not showing at its best, the strength of the brand will carry it. This is what tends to happen when wine lovers are confronted by the world's best known and most expensive labels. I have seen people raving about cork-tainted Bordeaux First Growths - assuming that the slightly 'miff' character imparted by the faulty cork was how the wine was supposed to taste.

At a judges dinner following a day at the Royal Sydney Show I watched the late Len Evans, the great mentor of the modern Australian wine industry, interrogate the associate judges about a wine that had been served to everyone - with the label in plain view: a slightly defective bottle of 1967 Echezeaux from the Domaine de la Romanee Conti. One after the other the young judges-in-training said pretty much what you would have expected of them in the presence of a great Burgundy. Evans then asked a couple of the more experienced judges for their comments. It quickly became apparent that they were less-than-seduced. He turned to the associates and said "I asked you to tell me about the wine, not the label."

I recently attended a sighted tasting of some of South Africa's most prestigious wines. Not all the wines were outrageously expensive, though very few were under R200 per bottle and most were in the R300+ range. It occurred to me - probably for the first time - that perhaps these wines had been put at something of a disadvantage in this sighted environment. When you're looking at a line-up of what are regarded as amongst the best of South Africa's current releases, it's possible that you burden them with elevated expectations. If they don't - or can't - live up to their reputations, they could actually emerge with lower scores than might otherwise be the case. (This doesn't mean that they would have been better off tasted blind - simply that lack of anonymity also carries a price).

Only a couple of the samples made it into the realm of gold medal ratings: Richard Kershaw's 2012 Elgin Clonal Selection Chardonnay and the Mulderbosch "1000 Miles" Sauvignon Blanc were my two unequivocal golds, though the Beaumont "Hope Marguerite" Chenin 2013 was close enough, as was the Mullineux Syrah 2012. There were several safe silver medals (scores of 80 - 89) - the 2009 Meerlust Rubicon, the Le Riche Cabernet 2011, the Bouchard Finlayson Sans Barrique Chardonnay 2013, the Stellenrust 48 Barrel Fermented 2012 Chenin Blanc, and the Newton Johnson Family Vineyards Chardonnay 2012 and the 2012 Pinot Noir.

My disappointment at this tasting was shared by almost everyone else in the room. There was a sense that they had been expecting more from the wines - and this may have influenced the outcome. When you are happily surprised by a wine, or a line-up of wines, your calibration moves upwards, and vice versa. But there are other, perhaps more important questions which arise from this: have we raised the bar too far too soon in our own minds or is the bracket of top-ranked wines over-populated? Have we left any room in our scoring system for the great wines still to be made?

The danger of the 100 point system as it is applied internationally is that no one is interested in a score of less than 90 - and very few critics ever score a wine 100. The real range of interest is somewhere between 91 and 97. This is a Procrustean bed into

which a country's top wines are forced to fit, making disappointment - the result of unreasonable expectations or unrealistic promises - inevitable.