

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 17 October 2014

For most of the past two hundred years the premium end of the Cape wine industry centred around the towns of Stellenbosch and Paarl. This was partly because the major producing merchants had their cellars (or, more recently their show cellars) there, but also because the appellations associated with the towns were clearly a source of many of the better wines. In time there developed a kind of *apartheid* around the regions - with those on the Cape Town side of the Du Toitskloof Pass regarded as fine wine producers, and the others “over the mountain” as bulk and distilling wine sources.

While much of this prejudice has vanished, or at least diminished, it is still retained in matters of grape pricing. When the wine of origin legislation was introduced just over 40 years ago, a fiction - the Coastal Region - was created solely to permit the wholesalers to blend wines from different premium-price appellations. These included Constantia, Durbanville, Stellenbosch, Paarl, Tulbagh and the Swartland. It excluded a number of places which are right on the coast, but which weren't important at the time - such as Walker Bay/Hemel-en-Aarde Valley.

If you blend fruit from Coastal Region vineyards with grapes from anywhere else, their designated origin (in terms of certification) becomes Wine of Western Cape - which is effectively meaningless. There are now plans to amend the legislation, extending the concept of Coastal Region all the way up the West Coast to Lutzville and along the Cape South Coast to Plettenberg Bay. Of course there would then be sub-divisions within this - not necessarily useful from a consumer perspective - but at least a step towards diluting the two class “citizenship” of the past.

If you ignore the politics of this and test the assumptions around the whole question of origin/terroir, the issues are generally geeky, rather than commercial. Those for whom the Swartland represents the most authentic expression of what the Cape produces, have their reasons. The cool climate brigade focuses on the Hemel-en-Aarde area, together with Elgin, and the vineyards near Cape Agulhas. Others support the pioneers opening up new frontiers like Sutherland or rediscovering old ones like Piekenierskloof.

There are of course a few notable exceptions. Constantia profits from a cooler climate than the other members of the Coastal Region club, and an image premium based partly on historic reputation, partly on shortage of supply. The real and undisputed exception however is Stellenbosch - an appellation which has been synonymous with South African fine wine for so long that even foreigners with only the sketchiest sense of our wine-lands know the name, and are willing to pay extra for its wines.

Much of Stellenbosch's reputation resides in the palpable quality of its best examples. It doesn't require a detailed analysis of wine show results to see the extent to which wines of Stellenbosch origin punch above their weight in local and international competitions. There could be some cause-effect confusion here: since there has been greater investment in vineyards and cellars in Stellenbosch compared with anywhere else, some of the apparent quality may be the result of the care which went into the production of the wine, rather than the intrinsic of soil and climate.

Just the same, it is difficult to gainsay the evidence: with properties like Jordan, Kanonkop, Vergelegen, Rustenberg, Tokara, Thelema, Kleine Zalze, Glenelly, Morgenster, DeMorgenzon, Hartenberg, Kaapzicht, and Stellenrust (all working - mainly or entirely - with fruit from their own vineyards, or at least from the appellation) there's clear

evidence that location is a key factor. Equally extraordinary is the breadth of what's on offer. Some of the country's finest cabernets, (including the vastly more temperamental cabernet franc), chardonnays, pinotages, shirazes and chenin blancs are grown here. Even sauvignon blanc, better suited to cooler zones than Stellenbosch, yields wines of elegance and finesse from sites closest to False Bay. Nowhere else in the world manages this diversity, at this level of quality.