

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 21 November 2014

Kanonkop's Johann and Paul Krige, together with winemaker Abrie Beeselaar, occasionally migrate to Gauteng with a roadshow of current releases and a sprinkling of older bottles. For anyone who is vaguely in the gravitational field of the tasting and is serious about fine SA red wine, the attraction of the event is irresistible.

The estate has been a force on the South African wine scene for over forty years. In this time there have been only three winemakers, Jan Boland Coetzee (now at Vriesenhof), Beyers Truter (now at Beyerskloof) and Abrie Beeselaar, the current incumbent. Each of them had enough time to get to know the nuances of the vineyards. Common to all three of them has been a respect for the fruit, with the winemaking and oak ageing kept subservient to the hallmark Kanonkop style. If you're looking for big and showy, you waste your time (and your money) putting down your name for an allocation.

The estate is situated in the heart of the Stellenbosch-Simonsberg appellation and the fruit potential is as good as anything you could hope to harvest in the region. While many winemakers happily affirm that their role in the production process is akin to that of a mid-wife (“the wines are made in the vineyards”), there is clearly more to a producer's success than minimal intervention winemaking. It is obviously important to lose as little as possible between the vine and the bottle - though the art of achieving this is enormously complex.

Beyond the pure agriculture of farming the vines, a great deal turns upon when to harvest, whether to macerate the fruit and for how long, the temperature of fermentation, and whether to punchdown or pump over. Even assuming you've managed to get this right, the complex decision matrix continues with when to press, at what pressure, how much press wine to add to the final blend, when and how long to oak, in which barrels, of what size and from which cooper. Nothing of this is mechanical - everything is inter-related, nothing is self-evident and every vintage is different. If the process could be reduced to a series of simple formulae, winemakers would need nothing other than a book with tried-and-tested recipes.

At this year's Kanonkop tasting the star of the show was intended to be the latest release (the 2013) of the Black Label Pinotage, - a Platter Five Star award winner and consistently the biggest selling ultra-premium Cape red. It lived up to its billing (as well it should with a price tag of over R1000 per bottle): fabulously dense, almost creamy fruit, curiously delicate violet whiffs, oak still very evident but already perfectly integrated. To give it context, the 2008 was presented alongside. A classy enough wine for the vintage, it lacked the length and purity of the latest offering.

More importantly, the Black Label did not overshadow the other current releases - a brilliant, savoury and beautifully restrained Cabernet Sauvignon (2011) and a more concentrated, but not overdone, 2011 Paul Sauer blend. Both were seamlessly assembled, unshowy and precise. The late release Pinotage (from the 2004 vintage, and part of the cellar's aged wine reserve still available for sale) gave a hint of how these wines mature. Polished and gentle on the palate, it offered the pleasures of bottle development in compensation for the slight lack of intensity - the result of a harvest that was a little too generous. Amongst the other older wines presented at the tasting, the 1991 CWG Paul Sauer was simply extraordinary while the 2007 Kadette - admittedly served from the magnum - was not out of class.

South African wine geeks argue at length about which estates ought to be considered for First Growth status when we come to attempt our equivalent of Bordeaux's 1855 Classification. As far as I'm concerned, Kanonkop is the only serious contender. While this may leave the list a little short to please some folks, it's no place for a feel-good affirmative vote.