

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 22 August 2014

The first Nederburg Auction took place in 1975. Forty years may not sound like much in the history of wine auctions - the Hospices de Beaune sale dates back to the Middle Ages and Christies has been selling wine since the 18th century - but it is a claim of some significance in the New World. While it wasn't the first of the modern era Cape wine auctions (that distinction goes to Fairview - an early sign of Charles Back's innovative marketing *nous*), it was the sale which caught the country's imagination, launching the concept of ultra-premium wine pricing and noble late harvest dessert wines.

Initially neither was much of a success. Not even the most upbeat of wine marketers could have described the financial outcome as worthy of the effort, while Gunter Brozel - Nederburg's cellar master and wine personality *extraordinaire* - muttered darkly that the R1-50 or so per bottle that his early Edelkeurs fetched did not justify the time and effort invested in making them.

My career in wine began while I was still a student in 1973, and I spent 1975 in France (acquiring much of the basic knowledge which made it possible for me to return to South Africa to permanent employment in the wine trade in 1976). I therefore missed the inaugural sale - though I gleaned a great deal about it from Benny and Sylvia Goldberg, who were stalwarts of the Auction for the first 25 years of its existence.

I began writing about wine shortly after my return to South Africa (initially for the Financial Mail and then, after John Platter moved to the Cape, for the Rand Daily Mail and its successor, Business Day). As a result, I have attended almost all of the subsequent auctions. For much of the 1980s and well into the 1990s, I was also Sotheby's wine consultant in South Africa, so I had the unusual - and perhaps unique - perspective of seeing the auction both as a commercial event, but also a public spectacle.

In its earliest incarnation it was a battleground of retailer egos, a place to settle scores which lingered from one year to the next in the minds of the larger-than-life personalities who peopled the trade. Since wine flowed more-than-freely (and since the bottle-store owners were intent in clawing back value for every cent spent over the year with the wholesale division of Nederburg's owners - Stellenbosch Farmers Winery) much of what took place could be ascribed to effects of alcohol.

There was the small-time and palpably inebriated retailer who tried to dominate the sale by spending more money than he could ever hope to pay-off (no one has ever satisfactorily explained how his account was settled); the bidding war between the owners of the the Rebel chain (erstwhile friends who had become sworn enemies of Benny Goldberg) for the charity lot of a 19th century Martell Cognac (knocked down to Benny Goldberg for the then outrageous sum of R1500). There was also the succession of retail chains over the years - including Pick & Pay and Makro - who vied to be the biggest buyers at the sale.

And then one day, the oomph went out of it: from being the most desirable event of its kind (if you weren't there, you needed a doctor's certificate to explain your absence), it became another chore in an over-busy wine year. Prices eased, the dogs barked, and the caravan moved on.

The Auction has lately emerged from High Care. While it is widely accepted that it is too important to be allowed to fail, its way forward is not as clearly mapped out as the road

behind. To be sustainable it must be real - which means realistic prices paid for truly desirable wines. To this end the selection process has been tightened up, and the balloons and bunnies toned down. Now it's up to the punters to buy into the deal.

The 40th Nederburg Auction takes place in Paarl on 12/13 September. For more info go to www.nederburgauction.co.za