

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 24 October 2014

With Christmas around the corner, it's hardly surprising that the news is all about competitions. The Veritas results were announced a few weeks back. 1767 submissions yielded 51 double gold, 155 gold, 538 silver and 601 bronze medals. The fact that 75% of all entries collected a medal seems to suggest that the judging operates in an environment akin to the national matriculation system. If this is so, it serves primarily to offer weaker candidates a soft landing, rather than any prospect of long term success. The punters are under no illusion when it comes to the value of a Veritas bronze. On the other hand, a double gold is rightly held to be real currency. To give you a sense of its rarity, once you exclude the double gold achievement of the three top-performing cellars (KWV 9, Spier 7 and Nederburg 6) there are only 29 double golds to be shared out between everyone.

No doubt there are wine lovers who wonder about the disproportionate success of the big producers – though of course they have more wines to enter. No one disputes the quality of their ultra-premium ranges, but can they truly be that much better than so many of the top estates? If you tally the double golds of Beyerskloof, Cederberg, Jordan, Dewetshof, De Grendel, Delaire-Graff, Diemersdal, Glenelly, Hartenberg, Haskell, Kleine Zalze, Rustenberg, Rust en Vrede, Saronsberg, Steenberg and Tokara the combined total comes to 5 – fewer than Nederburg managed on its own and just over half KWV's haul.

There's no easy answer to this conundrum: given that the top three cellars make really smart wines it's fair to say that the judges must have been doing their job to pick out the best of them. The Trophy Wine Show – of which I am chairman – has had each one of these three wineries as the show's best producer in the past six years. The days of the big cellars producing pedestrian wines is long gone. But our smaller estates also make fabulous wines, and it's not clear why their medal count was no match for the behemoths. It may have something to do with panel dynamics: the larger the number of judges, and the less discussion between them, the more the outcome is likely to gravitate to the safe, middle-of-the-road choice, rather than the edgy, avante-garde selection.

The potential for panellists' preferences to obscure qualitative assessment is never more pronounced than when they come from vastly different aesthetic backgrounds. Each votes for (in other words, retreats into) a comfort zone. It was exactly this process which made my early days of judging the Tri-Nations Wine Challenge problematic. Two Antipodean judges and one South African were never likely to share a coherent vision. For some years a neutral (UK-based) judge was invited to chair. Now the event has become the Six Nations Challenge (with Argentina, Chile and the United States joining in the fray) and the judging methodology has been adjusted to limit the chances of a wine with a high score from one judge but minimal support from the group usurping a class, a greater sense of balance prevails.

Results announced in Sydney in early October showed that South Africa, together with New Zealand, dominated the trophies (though we still lag behind in overall country points). John Loubser's Silverthorn The Green Man Blanc de Blanc MCC

2011 won its class, the trophy for the best white wine of show and shared the trophy for the best wine in the competition. South Africa's other trophy winners were Tokara's Elgin Sauvignon Blanc 2014, Stark-Conde's Three Pines Cabernet 2011 and KWV's The Mentor's Petit Verdot 2012. South Africa was also overall class winner in single White Varieties, White Blends, and Shiraz and we shared the honours in the Bordeaux blend category. Altydgedacht, The Foundry, Eagles' Nest, Mulderbosch, Paul Cluver, Delaire-Graff, Vergelegen, Cederberg, Mount Sutherland, Vriesenhof, Eikendal and Tokara won double golds while several more took home gold medals.

For the full results go to <http://boutiquewines.com.au/6-nations-wine-challenge/>