

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 25 July 2014

I dropped into the tasting room at Villiera recently, on a quiet day in the dead of winter. The space was surprisingly inviting - especially considering the cold front and the generally inhospitable atmosphere which prevails in what the Cape euphemistically calls the “green season.” (At nearby Joostenberg it was clear that neither the deli nor the restaurant were geared for the visitors who were at the farm: not enough serving staff, not enough cashiers, not enough management).

Predictably - given Villiera's reputation - bottles of fizz were being opened: Villiera makes several wines very well, and sells most of them at remarkably restrained prices. However, if you had to choose a single style most closely associated with the Grier family, it would be bubbly. Amongst the country's first methode traditionnelle producers (initially in a joint venture with Jean-Louis Denois, with whom they made “Tradition de Charles de Fere” back in the 1980s), they have come to master Methode Cap Classique in almost all of its manifestations. In the Charles de Fere days the basic varieties in the base wine were Pinotage and Chenin Blanc. Later the winemaking team came to focus on the traditional Champagne cultivars of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. However, they never gave up on innovation - and from no-sulphur-added to a light (low alcohol) fizz called Starlight - they've done pretty much everything you can with the category.

Along the way they've garnered their fair share of awards - a couple of Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show trophies, the overall best Fizz at the Tri-Nations Challenge in Sydney a few years back - avoiding at the same time the insane price points of some of their competitors. In fact, if there is a single identifying feature about Villiera, it is that every wine over-delivers, relative to its selling price. The Tradition Brut - the entry level MCC - sells off the farm for less than R90 per bottle. The Chenin Blanc selection starts at R43.

Domaine Grier wines (from their French property) appear to have defied the collapse of the Rand. The Grenache still costs R80 and a couple of classically styled blends (more Rhone than Cotes du Roussillon) start at R89. The Grier Brut, produced in this Southern French site, is strikingly different, finely delineated and worth tracking down. The cuvee includes Macabeu, used in Northern Spain to make cava. In Grier's wine, it shows greater concentration, contributing to the freshness and finesse of this quite unchampagne-like, champagne method sparkling wine.

The Griers have been making wines like this for over 30 years. In many respects they have come to bridge the space between the old-style wine industry (a wide range of mainly varietal wines churned out at often ludicrously low prices just to keep the business afloat) and its modern incarnation, where purity of fruit and careful site selection both play a role. Their range is big, but it is littered with wines which express nuance. Nothing very flash, but most things done thoughtfully and always with a sense of the consumer, rather than the marketing department, determining the style.

I suspect that their success is derived, at least in part, from it still being a family-run operation. Jeff, his sister Cathy, and cousin Simon have been hands-on managers, viticulturists and winemakers since they took over from their parents who bought the property in 1983. Unlike many of their contemporaries (the notable exception being Charles Back who has just been received a lifetime achievement award from the International Wine Challenge) they never treated the estate as a cash cow. They understood that ownership of a wine farm comes with an obligation to be a pro-active force. From wine styles, marketing strategies and most importantly, social

responsibilities, they were pioneers. It's easy to forget how good they are at what they do, and how easy it is to enjoy the wines they make. It's no surprise their tasting room was so hospitable while the rest of the winelands hibernated.