

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 26 September 2014

For students of Cape wine, the name “Perold” is hardly unknown. Abraham Perold was one of the country’s first viticulturists, famous because it was he who crossed pinot noir and cinsaut to create pinotage. However, his importance to our wine industry extends beyond this: his early work in sourcing planting material for our vineyards resulted in the introduction of over 150 different varieties of *vitis vinifera* in South Africa.

It was therefore with some restraint (and perhaps with a view to avoiding a dispute with KWV, which had trade-marked the name for a wannabe cult wine) that Herman Perold, great-nephew of the famous man, and his wife Susan have chosen to name their estate in Prince Albert “SoetKaroo.” They describe their operation as a hobby which got out of hand, though it’s difficult to know just how wildly out of control any operation which harvests a mere two tonnes of grapes can possibly be.

For those who obsess about wine trivia SoetKaroo is a treasure trove. With only one hectare of vineyard it may be South Africa’s tiniest wine estate. It certainly yields less fruit than La Romanée, Burgundy’s smallest Grand Cru. Situated in the midst of Prince Albert (the address is in Church street) SoetKaroo is a boutique operation wrapped up in a *garagiste* guise. Its real focus is fortified wine - a beverage category which has been shrinking for decades as the market for the high volume, low-priced, brands offered as a short-cut to inebriation has been superseded either by the increased disposable income of its target consumers (who now drink alcopops) or by the widespread distribution of the illegal ‘ales’ which are far and away the cheapest route to getting blotto.

In the bad old days South Africa produced and consumed an enormous volume of these fortifieds. In 1970 the market was around 53m litres annually. By 2013 it has dropped to 32m litres. Between 1997 and 2013 per capita consumption declined from 0.91 litres annually to 0.62. In the same period consumption of alcopops increased from 3.15 litres per person annually to 8.79. In short, fortifieds have fallen out of fashion and a true Cape classic is dying out for want of punters interested enough to keep the best producers going. One of the grape growers to Nuy - consistently one of the country’s top muscadel cellars - grubbed up a forty year old vineyard because it earned him too little to justify its farming cost.

To make the production and sale of these classically-styled wines your core business is arguably at least as insane as letting a hobby get out of hand - though the two go together (if you’re going to do something crazy, it might as well be in the context of something you are passionate about). In any event, this is what the Perold’s SoetKaroo enterprise is all about - tiny volumes of highly individualistic fortifieds, made for aficionados of this unfashionable (but still fabulous) beverage category.

I recently tasted several of their wines. They are all - as you might easily imagine - hand-crafted in the true sense of the term and it is their purity and nuanced fruit which sets them apart from many of the larger volume examples which are still produced for the survivors of muscadel’s traditional market. My clear favourite was the 2014 red Muscat de Frontignan, the most detailed and the most finely managed of the present line-up. This was closely followed by the 2012 Cape Vintage Touriga Nacional, which shows intense berry fruit, fresh savoury notes, and the hallmark dry-edge of true Port. Still (obviously) very young, it is certainly worth laying down.

If you seek an earlier maturing style, then go for the richer, plusher Cape Vintage Petit

Verdot - more forward on the nose and palate, but still uncloying on the finish. Either way, since the Perold fortifieds come in smaller-than-standard bottles, they age a little quicker - a useful attribute for the more impatient among us.