

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 3 October 2014

Last week I tasted two extraordinary Cape semillons. One was the 2009 Stellenzicht, now at the peak of its maturity and showing a restrained plushness reminiscent of a great Mount Pleasant from the Hunter Valley. It was the kind of wine which would have appealed to a chardonnay consumer, primarily because of its depth and richness, and the tangy citrus notes on the finish. There are very few Cape semillons like the Stellenzicht (it's a wine Guy Webber does particularly well) though the Boekenhoutskloof, with a little bottle age, comes pretty close.

The other - which, tasted blind, picked up a slightly higher score - was the Cape of Good Hope Laing's Vineyard 2012 from Anthonij Rupert Wines. Looking through previous tasting notes I saw that I had given the 2010 vintage a score of 90 (which probably puts it in my top 10 dry white wines, tasted blind, for the past couple of years). This latest release was even better, with a linearity and restraint which made it a wholly different from the Stellenzicht. The Laing's would appeal more to a Sauvignon than a Chardonnay drinker, great minerality, purity rather than austerity, and no overt woodiness.

More than a century ago semillon was the Cape's most planted variety. It presumably served the same purpose as chenin blanc did in the 1970s and 1980s, and, as with chenin, its versatility was both its strongest feature, but also its Achilles' Heel. Easily used and easily abused, it started to vanish after the phylloxera devastation as the replanted vineyards reflected a wider diversity of varieties. Where semillon was retained, the new clonal selection - high yielding large-berried fruit - undermined the cultivar's quality prospects. Until the 1980s it went into cheap white blends and also for distillation. A few growers - mainly in Franschhoek, where there were vineyards dating back to the early 20th century - made some good (but often erratic) wines. No one was willing to pay much for them, and since old vines produce less fruit, the whole business became uneconomical.

Henk Laing's semillon vineyard, which supplies the fruit to The Cape of Good Hope cellar, is one such block. Situated in the Skurfberg near Clan William, it is over 60 years old. With yields around two tonnes per hectare - it would be unviable were it not for Johann Rupert's old vineyard programme. Even so, at roughly R130 per bottle, it sells for too little to make economic sense.

This is not a peculiarly South African problem - Hunter Valley semillon is an acknowledged classic but producing it is more an act of love than a pursuit of profit. However, if we agree about the importance of quality old vine fruit, then the best old vineyards need to be preserved, and consumers must be ready to pay more to compensate for the lower yields. To an extent this is what has transformed chenin blanc: consumers have come to recognise the appeal of the variety and the value imbued by the site and the age of the vines. It isn't happening with semillon - and the result is that a number of the Cape's best whites are neglected or under-valued and in time they will vanish from the wine merchants' shelves.

Semillon's problem contaminates white Bordeaux blends - a category recently judged at this year's Riscura White Hot Wine Awards. The number of entries remains small, despite the obvious strength of the class. (50% of the wines rated 4 stars or more). White Bordeaux blends have steadfastly failed to catch on, while sauvignon blanc, the one blending component, is probably the country's most popular premium white. The problem clearly lies with semillon - whose greatness remains unrecognised and whose

qualities continue to be unappreciated.

With blends like Steenberg's Magna Carta, Vergelegen's GVB, Tokara's Director's Reserve and Cape Point's Isliedh as well as host of fabulous semillons on the line, it seems unimaginable that the message has still not penetrated the market-place.