

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 31 October 2014

The 2015 Platter Guide is now out, and with it the list of Five Star laureates. Ask most producers which of the various industry awards they would rather win, and a Platter Five star is right up there with Nobel prizes and Angelina Jolie (or Brad Pitt - depending on your preferences) as a blind date. However, for the past couple of years the results have been published to less than resounding applause. The increase in the number of wines making it past the gatekeepers could not be explained solely in terms of the palpable improvement in what is being produced in Cape vineyards.

In 2004, only 17 wines made the cut. By 2008 this had become 20. By 2010 this had gone up to 39 and in 2011 56. Last year the 2014 edition came out with 80 (including the new brandy category). Relative to the stringent criteria which had previously kept numbers down to under 0.5% of the total number of wines tasted, this was clearly too many. J.P Roussouw (of the eponymous food guide), who has taken over as publisher following Diners Club's purchase of the industry's most best known wine book, recognised that something needed to be done to restore rigour to the selection.

An entirely new Five Star judging process was introduced this year. It has been successful in reducing the number of laureates (only 50). Judging from the list of wines which made the cut, it has produced a very credible looking line-up. Of course, without knowing which nominees never made the grade, one can't be sure. This is why it is important to understand what changed in how the selection process was conducted - and then to ask the question of whether it raised the standard, or simply culled a higher number of candidates.

Here I must declare my hand. Last year I made it clear that I thought the escalation in numbers was indefensible, in part because progress alone demands that the bar should constantly be raised. No one seriously expected that the Five Star winners would always hover around the 20 - 25 mark, but three to four times that number was plainly a sign that the currency had been devalued. I contributed (together with many of the Guide's tasters) to the discussion around how the Five Star selection (which is conducted blind) could be managed to produce a fair and credible result. In the end, groups of three judges focused on the categories they understood best. They were assisted by two roving chairmen - of which I was one - to mediate, and to help calibrate across the different classes.

Now that I have seen the results, I am in no doubt that this is a vastly improved outcome. Eben Sadie has repeated his 2010 triumph as Winery of the Year, DeMorgenzon its 2014 victory in the white wine category while De Trafford took line honours with the red wine of the year. If you look at the list of producers who have made the cut, they are pretty much the group you would expect to see. Alheit, Boekenhoutskloof, Delaire, Thelema, Vilafonte, Vergelegen, Kanonkop, David Sadie, Mullineux, Flagstone. Reyneke, Newton Johnson, Le Riche, Stark-Conde, Warwick, Nederburg, Boplaas, The Foundry, Nuy, De Krans, Hartenberg, Richard Kershaw, Graham Beck, Nederburg and Buitenverwachting. There also noteworthy omissions - KWV The Mentors, Paul Cluver and Jordan come to mind - but it is better for all that the floodgates have been closed.

For the full list of the 2015 Five Star wines go to <http://www.winewizard.co.za/article/platter-guide-2015-five-star-wine-awards/>

With 80 as opposed to the 62 laureates of last year, it's clear that the Platter panelists weren't scraping around for worthy bottles.

This is a list which has grown consistently in numbers over the past decade, well ahead of the rate of increase of labels in the South African market. As recently as the 2004 edition there were a mere 17, and in 2008, 20. In 2010 the number had risen to 39 and in 2011 to 56.