

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 7 November 2014

The unusual thing about wines made from unusual varieties is that instead of their being attractive to punters because of their rarity, they usually languish unloved and unsold. Take nebbiolo for example. There are a few producers in South Africa working with what is conceivably Italy's most important premium cultivar. Almost all of them do a pretty creditable job. Three at least are potentially exceptional (depending on vintage). Morgenster has just released its 2012 (under the proprietary name of Nabucco). It is a bigger and more intense wine than the delicious and more forward 2011 and will need a few more years before it yields the same seductive textures and aromas.

At this stage the 2012 is closer in style to the great Barolos and Barbarescos on which it has been modelled, though it sells for a fraction of the price. (This does not mean that it is cheap, by the way: expect to pay about R300 per bottle and to have a comparable time before you can plunder your purchase). The 2011 was more approachable - though not in any way simple. Yet despite the fact that production is limited and the 2011 was comfortably the most accessible vintage released by the cellar, at least 20% of the original stock remained unsold at the time the 2012 was released.

Morgenster's proprietor, Giulio Bertrand, appears not to be in the least put out by this - he aims to hold back roughly this amount every year so that he can build up an aged release programme (exactly as he has done with the more sought-after Bordeaux blend). What surprised me was that the entire harvest had not been sold out within a month or two of release. Given its obvious quality, the rarity of nebbiolo in South Africa, and its competitive pricing vis a vis imports from Italy, I had expected demand to make more of a dent in the production.

Talk to John Loubser at Steenberg, and you will discover the same trend: the fabulous Steenberg Nebbiolo is one of the cellar's slowest moving wines, relative to the amount made every year. Despite consistently high ratings, and a sales force that has no difficulty placing far greater volumes of more popular (or simply better known) varieties, Steenberg's nebbiolo only trickles out of the cellar.

Bouchard Finlayson's solution to its admittedly minuscule nebbiolo production is to include it with other (equally obscure - at least to South Africans) varieties like sangiovese and barbera in a compote with three slightly less arcane French cultivars. It has taken many years and much critical success to achieve solid sales for what we all know now as a wine called Hannibal. It's clear that these relatively unknown cultivars don't attract much of an audience in their own right.

You could argue that Morgenster's Bertrand is something of a masochist when it comes to hard-to-sell varieties - given that in addition to the nebbiolo he has also planted sangiovese. Sold as Morgenster Tosca (in a blend of 60% sangiovese, 20% cabernet and 20% merlot - effectively a super-tuscan), the 2012 is far and away the best release to date, and at under R200 per bottle infinitely better value than the Italian counterparts in the market. Like the Nabucco, it's a slow sell, even to aficionados.

Talk to the country's few surviving riesling producers and you will hear the same story. Ask the KWV how easy it has been to sell its award-winning petit verdot and the answer, unsurprisingly, will be that the very small amount produced comfortably lasts the 12 months from the one release date to the next. Feiteras, which sometimes makes a world-class verdelho, is not fighting off punters trying to get an allocation, nor is

Overgaauw, which produces South Africa's only sylvaner. (It's consistently good, and it's been in the market for almost 40 years). There's only one conclusion that can be drawn from this: South African wine lovers prefer their vinous rarities to lie along well trodden paths.