

## Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 8 August 2014

An American wine marketer once pointed out that no one in California (most of which is not cool) ever claims that his wine is produced in a warm region. If cool implies good, then warm suggests plonk - so why even go down that avenue? It is equally true that some of our most successful regions are warm - and they do well (or at least don't seem to suffer any stigma) - precisely because they have been wise enough not to enter the temperature debate.

The Swartland - easily South Africa's 'sexiest' international appellation - is one of the toastiest premium wine areas in the world, and this hasn't tainted its reputation. True, it doesn't appear to focus on any traditionally cool climate varieties, (though adjacent areas have long been a source of fine sauvignon blanc - one the most heat sensitive of the premium cultivars). If your vineyards aren't in a recognised cool place, the trick is simply to avoid that discussion.

Nevertheless, cool climate has been something of a buzzword in South African wine circles ever since the late Tim Hamilton Russell launched the vineyards of Hemel-en-Aarde Valley over 35 years ago. Until then, weather conditions (and, for that matter, area of origin) were never really an issue. The punters bought the wines they liked and assumed that the winemakers knew more than they did.

Ever since Hamilton Russell made the temperature conditions of the Hemel-en-Aarde the region's USP (even before his first vineyards had borne fruit), the world has come to expect climate-appropriate wines from the vineyards around Walker Bay. No one, for example, seriously talks about the region's Cabernets. The Valley is judged on the success of its cool climate varieties, most notably Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

More than 30 vintages after its first release, the Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir enjoys the South African equivalent of Grand Cru status, with the latest release, the 2013, exuding the confidence (as well as the intensity and restraint) which comes from being the region's recognised benchmark for a generation. Less showy than the Bouchard Finlayson Tete de Cuvée - the region's other 'elder statesman' - it has more purity and less 'earthiness' in its fruit notes.

Elsewhere the area is vibrant with change. Bouchard Finlayson's Peter Finlayson (Hamilton Russell's first winemaker before setting up his own winery over two decades ago) can observe with some satisfaction the achievements of his sons (Peter-Allan and Andrew) who make several different Pinot cuvées under the Crystallum label. My favourite remains the Cuvée Cinema (edgier than the Mabalel from Elandsbloof, more refined than the Cuvée Max). The Newton Johnsons have come to dominate the Platter five star Pinot ratings, and a recent tasting of the Family Vineyards 2012 showed why: real harmony combined with haunting aromas. It is not perhaps as linear and intense as the Domaine des Dieux 2011 - one of the most striking South African pinots I tasted at a recent review of the category - but it is one of the most ethereal. Pinophiles can also profitably chase down the Sumaridge, and the reserve bottling of Creation.

Climate is also an important factor in Chardonnay production, though the variety is somewhat more forgiving than Pinot when it comes to surviving the impact of warmer weather. You need look no further than the delicious Ataraxia 2013, limey with the finest whiff of peach, or the Domaine des Dieux 2011, to see how the cooler location contributes its own mineral notes (as well as obvious freshness) to the mouthfeel and

the length of the wine.

With Chardonnay there's a choice about climate and style: many people prefer the fullness and texture of the altogether creamier Glen Carlou or the sweet-sour lemon and tangerine notes of the Mulderbosch or the Springfield Methode Ancienne - the latest release (2011) of which is truly delicious. With Pinot there's no such luxury - which is why it's not just a marketing trick to stress the point, over and over and over.