

Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show 2009: Quest for Terroir-driven wines

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THE GREAT FRENCH OENOLOGIST Jacques Puisais used to remark that a good wine was one which expressed "the guts of the place and whoever had made it." It was in the flavours - and in the emotions they evoked - that such wines conveyed a sense of the countryside, of the light, and of the soil that produced them.

In my previous visits to South Africa I did not really encounter many such wines. Most attempted to reproduce the intrinsic varietal features or the flavours which met the expectations of the public at the price point at which the wine was sold. There were some remarkable wines - but in small quantities - like the whites of Vergelegen and the reds of Thelema. However, even these examples reflected more the vision of the winemaker than an expression of terroir. This is generally the case with New World wines, though it is also true of France where such wines have been around for a long time - in Champagne, in Bordeaux and in the Southern Rhône.

When Trophy Wine Show Chairman Michael Fridjhon asked me if I had come across wines clearly expressing a real sense of origin, I feared I might have to reply "no". But during the visits I made after the show I had the good fortune to taste some remarkable and original wines, wines of great personality, produced by winemakers who are not slaves to fashion and who invest all their efforts in obtaining an expression of place.

The most astonishing turned out to be marvels from pockets of the Swartland, Paarl and Wellington, from bush-vines which grow in the midst of an arid, austere but magnificent landscape reminiscent of Languedoc or Roussillon in France. Unpretentious, hard-working and passionate growers showed fellow international judge Julia Harding and me some splendid wines, all with a sense of character infinitely more authentic than many of the great names of Stellenbosch. Vondeling, Scali, Sequillo and the sublime Columella, Lammershoek and Bosman are names to remember. Here the white wines have a crystal purity to their expression and are impossible to stereotype. The reds are harmonious, filled with the aromatic notes which are part of the very atmosphere of the region.

Other equally promising places - where the minerality which is an element of the character of the whites and reds is more successfully retained - are Elgin, Walker Bay and Cape Agulhas, homes to Ataraxia, Creation, Shannon (Mount Bullet) and Strandveld (Adamastor).

However, in terms of the Sauvignon Blancs, although they were generally better made than ever before, those which I found the most original and the most representative of their place of origin were not from any of these areas. Instead, it was the 2007 Constantia Glen - with its 12% alcohol and its penetrating freshness that might rival a good Sancerre - which most impressed me. Then also, the intriguing, slightly salty, but perfectly elegant Fryer's Cove from the minuscule terroir of Bamboes Bay was utterly unique, as was the mineral tension in the majestic 2008 Sauvignon from Waterkloof.

As far as Chenin Blanc goes, the stand-out wine for me was the 2007 De Morgenzon (Stellenbosch).

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The question of the Cabernets is more fraught. Here, as in Bordeaux, these are generally made for blending, and so they are more representative of an individual vision of the variety than of a precise and properly defined place. My South African friends who were judges at the Trophy Wine Show think that there are indeed notable differences between the Cabernets of Stellenbosch, of Franschhoek, of Somerset West and elsewhere. I was certainly able to recognise the diversity of styles within these three areas - but I did not have an answer to the question about whether the aromas of mint, eucalyptus or rosemary which are evident in certain wines are regional features, or simply defects. Since I love these notes - which are only rarely found in Europe - I am tempted to suggest that these are quality features deriving from precise locations. But I have been told that they are more likely to have appeared as a result of stress, or as a consequence of the virus which still infects far too many of the Cape's vineyards.

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Regrettably, many of these wines were not included in the line-up of the competition. The producers told me that they do not show them because they believe they have no chance of winning a medal. They must be joking! I can easily confirm that the judges in this competition seek out wines of personality - as much for the benefit of consumers as for the instruction of the associate judges (young winemakers or wine writers who attend to enhance their knowledge and tasting abilities).

The presence of these more striking examples makes it easier to put into perspective the more pedestrian wines, made according to the same recipes. Certainly they are now better vinified than before, but they are boring, over-oaked and difficult to drink at 14.5% alcohol (and more).

I believe that in the near future terroir-driven wines will multiply in number. A significant amount of quality vineyard is converting to organic and bio-dynamic viticulture, where the assimilation of the flavours imparted by the soil is pretty much a given. Wines of this kind naturally express the characteristics of place. Consumers will abandon wines which reproduce the same aromas, the same mouthfeel year after year - they too seek diversity, whether from single varieties or from blends.

In time there will be more Malbecs and Petit Verdots - which seem to me to suit South African conditions better than the Merlots. There may also be an increase in Mourvèdre, for use with Syrah - and perhaps something achieved using Riesling and the other white varieties. However, above all, the objective must be the best possible nexus between cultivar, soil and climate - since this is the foundation for the development of true terroir-driven wines.