

10 May 2015



Great wines come from imbibing lessons of the past

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The annual old wine tasting — the curtain-raiser to the Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show — was held in Paarl a few days ago. It offered the competition's local and international judges a view into the history of the Cape wine industry that was both instructive and seductive.

Received wisdom holds that the pre-1980s wines were rustic and a little clumsy. The term frequently used was "dikvoet", a descriptor that almost celebrated the four-square richness of a bygone era.

The late 1970s saw the introduction of small oak barrels but also the high-speed production technologies of roto-tanks and cold stabilisation. It was something of a precursor to a period about which most commentators are largely diffident: 1981-1996.

Here was an industry willing to embrace international practices but constrained by isolation. New plantings, virus-free vineyards and the ever-present aesthetic of international buyers drives the next decade.

It has been only in the past few years that a greater sense of certainty has prevailed about what vineyards can give and the extent to which production strategies should be allowed to interfere with the expression of the fruit.

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If you follow this narrative everything is, and has always been, on track. We've passed from the Dark Ages to an era of enlightenment without the pain of the vinous equivalent of the French Revolution. Our ancestors did pretty well considering, but it was only in recent years that we moved from caves and hovels into the internet age.

The old wine tastings of the past five or six years tell a different story about the distant past but to an audience too small to contradict the entrenched beliefs of wine drinkers.

It is clear now that our "Dark Ages" were no darker or more primitive than those of Europe, the Americas and the Antipodes.

In this tech-dependent era, it's difficult to imagine that 50 years ago most winemaking was intuitive; very little was known about the chemistry that transformed fruit to fine wine. Secondary or malolactic fermentation was properly described by Peynaud only in the 1960s. Fruit selection, riper harvesting and commercial yeasts reached Bordeaux only in the second half of the 1970s.

At last weekend's old wine tasting we saw some beautifully aged Cape chardonnays made in the 1990s. The 1997 Bouchard Finlayson Kaaimansgat and the 1999 Chamonix Reserve both showed that the fruit and skills were in place to make world-class wines.

While the reds from the 1980s generally reflected the period of transition in which they were produced, the 1983 Rozendal, from one of the last harvests off Lanzerac's ancient vineyards, was extraordinary. A blend of 75% cabernet sauvignon and 25% cinsaut, it had a freshness and plushness that was utterly seductive.

Going further back, the 1976 Nederburg Auction Cabernet, the 1970 and 1969 Zonnebloem Cabernets and a trio of wines from 1965 were all breathtaking in their beauty and refinement. Contradicting the belief that Cape wines don't age, the 1965 Alto Selected Cabernet, the 1965 Zonnebloem Cabernet and the 1965 Chateau Libertas offered proud evidence of great old vineyards and world-class winemaking.

You might reasonably argue that it is gratuitously self-indulgent to talk about wines of which so few bottles remain that sampling them is a little like tasting honey recovered from the pyramids. Given that today's wines come from different clones and probably different sites, what possible link bridges contemporary wines to those of the past?

The answer lies in the revision of the historical narrative and what that tells us about what could lie ahead.

If we don't believe in the potential of what comes from our cellars, we won't imbue these wines with the emotional and monetary investment they deserve and their producers require to achieve a best that is way better than merely "good enough".