



The 41st Nederburg Auction of rare South African wines will take place on 11 and 12 September at Graue Hall, the dedicated venue named after a former owner of the wine farm

A Secret History

South African wine's *belle époque* – between the '40s and the '70s – has produced some wines to rival world icons. And they're about to come under the hammer.

Words JOHN MAYTHAM

HERE'S SOMETHING FEW PEOPLE KNOW about South African wine – some of the really old stuff is exceptional. Because the secret is becoming less closely guarded, the examples of this 'golden' period that go under the hammer at the Nederburg Auction in September will fetch very high prices. I'm lucky enough to have tasted benchmark wines from great vintages across the wine world, and I'd include a 1940 Chateau Libertas on my list of the best five wines I've ever drunk. And I'm not alone. There are prominent names in the wine world who have been gobsmacked by their first exposure to one of those legendary wines from the '40s to the '70s. Jancis Robinson tasted a bottle of the 1966 GS Cabernet (six bottles on auction in September) on a recent trip to SA. Her score: 20/20. Her notes: 'Absolutely stunning; such a beautiful combination of maturity and delicacy, but with far more fruit integrity than most 1966 red Bordeaux would have now. Lightly minty, fragrant; it spread right across the palate with satin texture. Gorgeous.' Steven Spurrier, who organised the Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976, described a 1965 Zonnebloem Cabernet (also on auction) as having 'an extraordinary confidence and warmth, much more so than the same vintage from Château Margaux would have now'.

Most cognoscenti would put the cutoff point for this kind of ageability at around 1982 – the Rustenberg Cabernet from that year is still stellar. Yes, there are wines from the '80s and '90s that still give pleasure, but it's very hit-and-miss, and the pleasure isn't of the acute and glorious kind that those wines from the '50s, '60s

and '70s give. And it's too early to tell what level of longevity will attach to more recent wines.

So what made these wines so long-lasting? After all, the wine makers knew far less about soil science and cellar hygiene and organic chemistry than today's viticulturists and cellar masters. It's a mystery, says wine writer Michael Fridjhon – but he offers some guesses: 'All of the wines from this era came from unirrigated vineyards; all of the vines were untrellised, low yielding and in perfect balance. Virus appears to have been endemic, so only the cooler, drier years delivered ideal ripening conditions. These are not circumstances that are conducive to sound commercial wine making in the 21st century. Few grape growers today believe they can afford the tiny yields, the risks of dry-land viticulture, the labour of harvesting bush vines, the holding costs of maturing unshowy, restrained and brooding masterpieces.'

A very aged curiosity on offer at the auction is a lot of two 375ml bottles of Joubert Family Wines' Joubert Muscat d'Alexandrie going back to 1800. These will be drawn from a 115-litre French oak barrel that had been filled with Muscat d'Alexandrie by one of the Joubert ancestors around 1800. Subsequent to that it has been topped up annually with a younger vintage of Muscat wine. Wine writer Angela Lloyd has been lucky enough to taste it. 'There are almost fathomless depths of molasses, dried naartjie peel, nutmeg and cinnamon spice,' she says. And you'll need a bank account with fathomless depths to be a bidder. This gem has previously sold at R50 000. For one bottle. The other vintage wines probably won't scale that peak but they'll be on the same slope. The GS has a reserve price of R8 000 for the six-bottle lot, but, given that Wine Cellar recently sold a single bottle for R12 000, well, 'the sky's the limit' seems appropriate – for this and the other treasures for sale.

'There has been unbelievable international and local praise for our vintage wines recently,' says auction panellist Roland Peens. 'Top vintage Bordeaux can easily sell for R20 000 per bottle, so we can expect our rare vintage wines – literally the very last bottles of some of these wines – to reach similar high prices.' □