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WINE

Value vines

Neil Pendock visits some cobwebby corners of the SA wine cellar in search of exciting wines

July is the month the pundits at *Wine* magazine taste their way through hundreds of entries for their annual *Best Value Guide*. Rules for producers are straightforward: if your wine retails at under R60, send them four bottles plus a R170/wine entry fee and roll the dice. Producer downside is limited to cost and the vagaries of blind tastings, since unsuccessful entries will not be reported, saving red faces all round.

For while blind tastings are altogether more satisfactory than the sighted assessments, they are far from foolproof, as Anthony Rawbone-Viljoen can attest. He entered his 2006 vintage Oak Valley Chardonnay into the recent London International Wine Challenge and was rewarded with a certificate of commendation, a rating somewhat lower than a bronze medal. All was not lost, however, because his UK agent entered the same wine and that won a gold medal.

As Rawbone-Viljoen remarked drily: "It makes their judgment suspect if the same wine gets different scores."

From a consumer point of view, the *Wine* magazine competition is not ideal since producers will obviously enter wines bottled from their best tank or barrel. Besides, it's an open secret that show medals sometimes adorn bottles that have little in common with the wines that won them. Another quibble is that fixing a R60 ceiling is too arbitrary: Etienne le Riche's 2005 vintage blend of cabernet sauvignon and merlot is superb value at R80.

So I thought I'd put my money where my mouth is and set out on a week-long road trip at the end of June: 4 000 km travelled, 75 wineries visited and over 600 wines tasted. It was something I regretted several times, the worst being the 3 am Jimi Hendrix concert that rocked my bedroom in the student suburbs of Stellenbosch.

Even if Oak Valley is too pricey for *Wine's Best Value Guide*, the chardonnay 2006 is terrific, with a wonderful citrus aftertaste that lingers for minutes (reasonably priced at R85/bottle). And R69 for the 2007 sauvignon blanc is a deal. Completely different to the awesome 2006, the sauvignon's tropical flavours, with a hint of minerality, are seductive.

For chardonnay I am a cheap date, finding the unoaked 2007 vintage from Wamakersvallei Winery in Wellington irresistible at R24,40 - all chalk and apricots.

White blends are suddenly fashionable and the Joostenberg 2008 vintage blend of chardonnay and viognier is a dish. R32 buys a bottle of James McKenzie's 2008 vintage blend of chenin, sauvignon and semillon from Nabygelegen in Wellington. Called Lady Anna after the 18th-century matriarch who made wine on the farm, it's also incredible value - unlike his 1712 flagship red blend, which he sells to a top London hotel for £11/bottle. The establishment then lists it at £77.

I was torn between two shirazes, so I'll mention them both: Toit Wessels' Ridgeback 2005, well-poised at 12½% alcohol (a remarkable achievement for Agter Paarl), and the Dombeya 2006, with an almost Australian intensity.

DIAL 'EM UP

Oak Valley Wines: Tel: (021) 859-4110; or go to:
www.oakvalley.co.za
Le Riche Wines: Tel: (021) 887-0789; or go to:
www.leriche.co.za
Wamakersvallei Winery: Tel: (021) 873-1582; or go to:
www.wamakersvallei.co.za
Joostenberg Wines: Tel: (021) 884-4932; or go to:
www.joostenberg.co.za;
Nabygelegen Private Cellar: Tel: (021) 873-7534; or go to:
www.nabygelegen.co.za
Ridgeback Wines: Tel: (021) 869-8068; or go to:
www.ridgebackwines.co.za
Dombeya: Tel: (021) 881-3895; or go to:
www.haskellvineyards.com
Overgaauw Estate: Tel: (021) 881-3815; or go to:
www.overgaauw.co.za

For pinotage on steroids, look no further than the Bilton 2007 made by former Meerlust magician Rudi de Wet. As he says: "I listened to Giorgio [Dalla Cia] rather than Beyers [Truter]", and the 9% petit verdot he added provides a whole new flavour dimension.

But the biggest eye-opener was the 2005 vintage wines from Overgaauw. Made by David van Velden, the Tria Corda blend of cabernet, merlot and cabernet franc has the minerality of a Stellenboschkloof Merlot, all the powerful fruit of his cabernet and the perfume of a cabernet franc.