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David van Velden, Overgaauw



Kranskop



Slanghoek Valley

CSB Wines

Thursday, July 03, 2008 by Neil Pendock

Neil Pendock reports on a week spent in the cobwebby corners of the South African wine cellar.

Just how sedentary the South African wine writing corps has become was confirmed by the Stellenbosch producer who received a request for tank and barrel samples from a taster for an annual wine guide. "Come out to the farm" was the reply "and you can taste anything you like". "Oh no, we can't do that or the small producers will complain." Which has to be the most powerful argument yet against South African terroir, or at least the reporting thereof.

Driving around the outer fringes of the Winelands last week with the *Sunday Times'* Good Value Guru searching for value for money wines (which does not necessarily mean cheap as one of the wines to be featured retails for R180 a bottle), what struck me with more force than a corked Sauvignon Blanc was how polarized the industry has become. One pole is located in suburban Cape Town, the other in a Platteland village like Bonnievale or Riebeek Kasteel, which for the intellectual, economic and aesthetic distance between them, might as well be the moon.

Business Day pundit Michael Fridjhon wrote about "the crowd at the starting blocks" last month - "which newcomer wineries will track the likes of Thelema" - and mentioned the usual suspects - Cape Point Vineyards, Constantia Glen and Eagle's Nest plus "the darling of the UK fine wine brigade" TMV, so famous, no decoding of the initials is required. While some of the picks raised eyebrows (like the Gary Player wines made for a famous teetotaler in the Quoin Rock cellars of an "unfortunately high profile" owner, Dave King) most were sound, if expected.

My itinerary was set by the GVG so the only intersection between our two crowds was Tokara. But then a substantial marketing budget was not a requirement to make the GVG's hit list. The opposite, more likely.

My CSB ("crowd @ the starting block") wineries are mostly rediscoveries (for me at least) although the Rivieronderend Mountains were immersed in a cloud last Friday which scratched Lismore from the list and Julien Schaal was back in Alsace making wine at Domaine Blum. By the way, his 2006 Syrah made from cool climate Elgin fruit received the *Coup de Coeur* prize from a jury assembled by *Le Figaro* to taste wines made by French winemakers, beating *Business Day* CSB members Glenelly and Marianne, the former exhibit A in a burnt rubber aromatics suit.

My 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 his Merlot, all the powerful fruit of his Cabernet and the perfume of a Franc. My only reservation is why the blend should cost R138 when the single varieties are under R100 - but then perhaps he used his best barrels to make the blend.

The tasting started off on a humbling note, with David pouring (blind) a bottle of 1982 Steen. Deep yellow in colour, it was remarkably fresh with some kerosene notes like an aged riesling, so of course I pronounced it a venerable Sylvaner. Duh! With the label in sight, the similarity to an aged Vouvray was unmistakable. Viva sighted tastings, Viva!

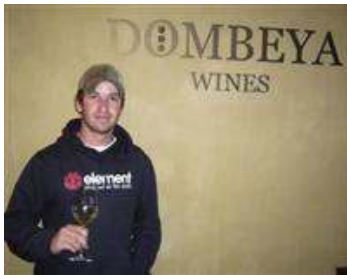
My top Sauvignon Blanc of the trip came from Oak Valley. The 2007 vintage is quite different to the wonderful 2006 but I did enjoy the tropical flavours with some serious minerality in the background and its excellent value at R69. The 2006 Chardonnay had a wonderful citrus aftertaste and I couldn't help but wonder if I was drinking the wine that recently won gold at the International Wine & Spirit Competition in London, or the one that got a Certificate of Commendation, which is somewhere south of a bronze medal. Seems that the farm and their UK agent both entered the wine and two wildly different results was the answer. Oops!

Kranskop Merlot 2006 was an undiscovered gem for R45. In fact all the wines from

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Vernon Cole, Ridgeback



Wikus Pretorius, Dombeya



Bartho Eksteen, Hermanuspietersfontein

this small producer in the upper Klaas Voogds valley had an impressive acidity and freshness. With former Nederburg cellar master Newald Marais at the wheel, this is definitely CSB stuff.

Slanghoek Winery didn't disappoint and the curiously named Camera Bordeaux blend 2007 at all of R21 is a consummate restaurant house wine. Last year, Boets Nel's Touriga Nacional from De Krans in Calitzdorp blew me away with intense spicy flavours in a pleasantly rustic style. This year his Tempranillo impressed with fresh and elegant flavours of blueberry and blackcurrant. Close your eyes and you'd swear it was a Mischa Cabernet from Wellington, so thank heavens I was tasting sighted. Both wines are well priced at R40 but for less than double this, Carel Nel's 2006 Ring of Rocks blend of Cabernet, Merlot and Touriga from Boplaas, has intense berry flavours underlain by the chalkiness of those crushed seashells deposited millions of years ago when the Klein Karoo was a balmy lagoon.

I'm torn between two Shirazes: Toit Wessels' Ridgeback 2005 with an awesome 12½% alcohol and thrilling finesse from Agter Paarl and the Dombeya 2006 with an almost Australian intensity that Wikus Pretorius let us taste, so I'll mention them both. For a Pinotage on steroids look no further than the Bilton 2007 made by former Meerlust magician Rudi de Wet. As Rudi says, "I listened to Giorgio (Dalla Cia) rather than Beyers (Truter)" and the 9% Petit Verdot adds a whole new flavour dimension.

And I've now run out of space before telling you about the fabulous 1989 maiden vintage of Sakkie Kotze's Prima from Le Bonheur; the best Colombard in South Africa from Goedverwacht and a bilingual encounter with Sauvignon specialist Bartho Eksteen at Hermanuspietersfontein and many other vinous gems from the unexpected side of the tracks. It's called quitting while you're ahead.

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