

There's something to be said for persistence when it comes to building a wine brand: when Paul Cluver Senior established his Elgin vineyards almost three decades ago, South Africa was cabernet country and Stellenbosch was the only appellation which commanded a real price premium. The very idea of cooler climate wines, delicate whites like riesling, and pale-coloured reds like pinot noir, was anathema to the punters of the day. If his primary business had not been apples, and if he hadn't been passionate about wine, he couldn't have justified turning the first clod to plant the first vine.

Getting a new wine region onto the map is not simply a matter of establishing the vineyards, waiting for them to reach fruit-bearing age, setting up a winery, making some wine and launching it to great fanfare. It's a long slow business to build a brand and it requires at least twice the effort and takes twice as long if you are developing a brand and an appellation at the same time. You need other producers to set up shop around you for the region to acquire critical mass, and this doesn't happen overnight. Hamilton Russell opened up the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley in the late 1970s. Twenty years later only one other producer had joined him. However, in the next twenty years a further ten cellars - and many more growers - had joined the throng.

Cluver proceeded slowly at first: he worked with Nederburg, cultivating only the varieties which cellarmaster Gunter Brozel (who had been partly responsible for persuading him to plant the vines) was prepared to buy. It was only in 1997 that the first Cluver wines were bottled. It is only in the last few years that enough wineries have been established in Elgin to make it a wine tourism destination in its own right.

While in theory the pioneer enjoys the greatest share of mind, there's also a risk that those that have been around longest get taken for granted. So far this hasn't been a problem at Cluver, possibly because the wines continue to show improvement. Andries Burger (who has been the property's winemaker since the first grapes were crushed in 1997) does not make his wines to a formula. Every vintage is different, and vinifications must take account of this. Martin Prieur, from Domaine Jacques Prieur in Burgundy, has been the winery's consultant for several years and helps to fine-tune these decisions.

I recently tasted the full Cluver estate range. Its standard is higher and more consistent now than at any time in the past. Even the entry level pinot noir - once the weakest wine - is a marked improvement on the launch vintage. The sauvignon blanc is a fine (though not particularly intense) example of the fresher style, softer on the palate than I expected, but easy enough drinking just the same. From 2017 onwards the dry and off-dry rieslings have been merged into a single wine, making it one of the Cape's best examples of the noble German variety. The gewürztraminer has been culled - a great pity given its consistently high standard. It seems there isn't room in the market for two aromatic wines in one range.

The real triumphs are the top cuvées of pinot and chardonnay - both sold under the Seven Flags label. Both have length and elegance, carrying their serious oaking very well. Ideally they are not for early consumption, so that greater integration and even less evident oak is what lies ahead. In their youth they are neither of them significantly better than the standard estate wines made from the same cultivars. However, since both the Seven Flags Pinot and the Seven Flags Chardonnay come from older, better established vineyards they will peak later, and deliver greater intensity, intricacy, precision and complexity. Only those with a willingness to defer gratitude will discover their true merit. In the long-haul world of serious, site-driven wine connoisseurship, this is the only measure which counts.