

In a recent article I wrote about the value proposition of South African wines. At pretty much every price point from R50 to R200 there's great wine to be found without huge effort: consumers are also well served by the guides, shows and industry publications. Errors - where they occur - are mainly the result of unresolved aesthetic criteria. If these sources share a fault in common (and in this I include my own Wine Wizard website) they are too generous about ordinary wine. There are so few really bad wines that dull and boring examples land up being positioned several tiers higher than the pleasure they are capable of delivering.

This is reflected in the ratings, where it's almost impossible to find a one star wine in the Platter Guide, or a wine scoring less than 12 points on the 20 point system or less than 85 on the so-called 100 point system. When I used to judge for the Platter Guide I once scored a wine at zero (it was, I have to say, unspeakably bad and the winery was closed down by the authorities a few months later). My editor mailed me immediately to ask if I had forgotten to rate the wine. When I explained that I thought that zero stars might even have been a little generous, everyone was a little nonplussed: the idea of a wine being worth no points at all is alien to most judging systems, and most judges.

I taste between 4000 and 5000 wines a year, mostly blind, the majority of these on the so-called "International" 100 point system where the floor score is 83 - an outcome more common in my rankings than in those of my colleagues (where you would battle to find much garnering anything under 87). The difficulties for consumers trying to make sense of subjective assessments of aesthetic objects are therefore dramatically compounded by the absence of unanimity in the opinions of wine judges, or the system they use, or even how they calibrate within a given system.

In this welter of uncertainty wine drinkers are entitled to assume that they are being spared the details of anything except wines which are better-than-average and above. However, looking through my notes from the past couple of weeks I realised how many truly dull wines languish in the trade, and how scoring systems which start in the early 80s conceal this truth from the punters.

Take Methode Cap Classiques - there are many very good ones out there, but even from cellars with a reputation for making decent bubbly there's a surprising number of very ordinary wines (and quite a few that are past their sell-by date). The Bon Courage Jacques Bruere Reserve is very good - in fact, it is consistently one of the Cape's best. The 2010 Jacques Bruere Rose however is falling apart. The Pierre Jourdan wines from Franschhoek went through a bad patch, but are starting to look good again - not so the non-vintage Blanc de Blancs (retailing at over R300 per bottle). Kleine Zalze makes a number of very good wines, but its 2011 Brut Rose is not one of them. La Motte produces excellent still wines - the 2014 Brut should have no place in the same range (not even at half its R300 price tag). Ken Forrester's Sparkle Horse Brut is another bubbly to be avoided. All of these sit on the bottom rang of my latest tastings but the 83 points (the lowest the table allows) doesn't convey how very ordinary they actually are. (Lest you think I'm ungraciously mean in my assessments, at the same tasting the L'Ormarins Blanc de Blancs 2012 scored 90 while the Simonsig Cuvée Royale topped the rankings on 92).

I'd like to enjoin wine drinkers to vote with their wallets and boycott the rubbish - but until the critics (myself included) and the guides are unequivocal about what to avoid, wine merchants' shelves will be riddled with these anomalies.