

The 1980 Meerlust Rubicon gave South African wine drinkers their first high profile red Bordeaux blend, effectively launching a category which, over time, has come to dominate the premium end of the red wine business. Sure, there are the exceptions - Kanonkop Black Label Pinotage, La Motte's Hanneli R, Waterford's The Jem - which trade in reasonable quantities at the more stratospheric price points. However, any analysis of successful ultra-premium reds will show that Bordeaux blends (many predominantly cabernet sauvignon-based) own the space. Some, like Meerlust Rubicon, achieve that perfect nexus of premium pricing and large volumes. Others, like Vergelegen V and Mvemve Raats De Compostella have been selling consistently above the R1000 per bottle mark (or equivalent) for at least ten vintages.

This doesn't mean that all the other red wine categories are doomed to languish in a twilight zone: Rust en Vrede has a couple of ultra premium reds where shiraz is a component; the Mullineuxs single site syrahs sell out within days every year. Unless you're extremely well connected you won't even get to see a bottle of Boekenhoutskloof's The Journeyman, released only occasionally and made mainly from cabernet franc.

True, average shiraz pricing has now plateaued: consumers are tired of the fatal combination of over-planting and poor winemaking. Their resistance has yielded a very healthy result: growers have had to pay better attention to their vineyards while winemakers are now more precise and thoughtful in their fruit handling.

At a recent tasting of generally quite popularly priced shiraz/syrahs (there's no difference between the two names) there were several very attractive wines, mostly accessible, none requiring serious ageing. Three finished on 90 points (which may not sound like a high score in an age where most judges work in a five point range of 91 to 96, but which for me places them in my top 10% of shirazes currently in the market).

I was pleased to see the reappearance of Landskroon in the rankings: the Paarl property has been in the De Villiers family for generations. The 2015 is packed with slightly smoky raspberry aromas, delicate and savoury spice notes, all melded together with finely integrated oak. It's neither overly big, nor is it too showy - just very good food wine.

Something of a renaissance also appears to be happening at Zandvliet - another property long associated with shiraz. The 2015 standard release offers slightly peppery red fruit notes while the palate is fine, restrained and effortless. It is not markedly different from the vastly more expensive Hill of Eon 2016 from the same cellar. The third of my 90 point shirazes came from Allée Bleu - the single vineyard 2014 - a wine which carries its intensity and depth of fruit perfectly.

It was at Allee Bleu that my top wine of the tasting had been produced, and it was not a shiraz: instead it was made from the one cultivar is still battling a pre-1990s prejudice - pinotage. Notwithstanding the success of producers like Kanonkop and Beyerskloof, and the work done by ABSA in sponsoring the Pinotage Top 10 for over two decades, the memories of the clumsy wines made in the 1970s have clearly tainted the achievements of the next generation.

Allée Bleu's Old Vine Pinotage - produced from an ungrafted block of 40 year old Piekenierskloof vines - finished in the Absa top 10 and was my standout wine in an impressive pinotage line-up. Fabulously intense fruit, raspberries and blackcurrants, beautifully managed oak ageing, creamy but still savoury textures - everything you would expect from a memorable bottle of red. There were several other high scoring examples, including the Arendskloof Voetspore Pinotage 2017 (which sells for about R150), the Eagles Cliff 2017 (from the same cellar as the Arendskloof but at less than half the price) and the Bosman Family Vineyards 2015.

Pinotage really has made a come-back - it's now time for serious wine drinkers to treat it with the respect that it deserves.

