

Route to market is probably the single greatest difficulty confronting the small and mid-size Cape wine producers. If you are very big, or if you've been around for long enough to have brand status in the eyes of consumers, you can always find a home in the portfolio of one of the big distributors. If you would rather have control over your destiny, you can also elect to manage the entire sales and marketing side yourself. This strategy comes with added costs, no real economies of scale, and some resistance from the major retailers who want deliveries aggregated to ensure the fewest number of trucks in their parking lots. If you are neither of these you have to find a home at one of a handful wholesaler/negotiants.

Those who were prescient enough to have made the right choice land up in good enough company to make wine merchants pay attention. Over time, as relationships develop, more and more wines from the distributor's range get added to the wine lists of restaurants, and obtain listings in the wine savvy off-licences. If the whole set-up holds together they have the best of all possible worlds. Instead of being lost in the massive ranges of the big wholesalers, or carrying costs which could and should be shared with a few other cellars, these producers enjoy the right brand associations, while minimising wastage, and enjoying a reasonable presence in the trade.

At a recent tasting hosted by one of these niche wholesalers, I came across several very good wines, no real disappointments, and a higher than average hit rate of good value bottlings. Constantia Uitsig has been making several fine wines - the 2013 Cap Classique was particularly memorable, garnering a host of awards. The current (2014) has much the same profile - though it seems a little sweeter and simpler than its predecessor. The 2015 Semillon, however, was flawless: intense, just herbaceous enough to deliver food-friendly freshness, and with barrel creaminess for richness and depth. At around R150 per bottle, it's under-priced in terms of value. Fairview's Drie Papenfontein 2016, similar in style (though with sauvignon blanc providing the freshness, and the semillon the length and breadth), fits the same flavour profile, at much the same price. Also from Fairview the Nurok 2016 (chenin, viognier, roussanne and grenache blanc) is a completely different style of blended white wine: none of the grippy zestiness you get from semillon and sauvignon, but instead textured, faintly creamy, and with just a hint of fragrance - not a bad buy at the same price point.

Matthew van Heerden - ex Uva Mira - produces one of the best Cape chardonnays I've tasted in the past six months. The oak is evident but perfectly integrated; more importantly the barrels have been used to add leesy complexity rather than wood aromatics. At just over R200 per bottle it's not an everyday drink except for oligarchs and politicians, but it's worthy of a special occasion dinner. If you're looking for something pitched at a more approachable price point, the Beaumont (unwooded) Chenin 2017 is quite extraordinary: fabulous fruit intensity - pear drops on steroids - yet dry and rounded on the finish.

Vondeling makes make a number of very impressive wines - the Babiana blend regularly wins awards and picks up high ratings. While I thought the latest release (2016) still needed time to integrate, I had no reservations about the Rose - perfumed yet dry, and on shelf at around R70 per bottle. Also from Vondeling the 2015 Monsonia Rhone-style blend (which takes over from the very successful Erica) is a wine well worth tracking down, despite its near R200 price tag.

Two other reds also caught my attention - the Beaumont Vitruvian (Rhone and Bordeaux varieties in surprising harmony) and the Tamboerskloof single vineyard (John Spicer) shiraz. Neither are bargains - the former sells for over R300 and the latter for over R700. The Vitruvian is about elegance and finesse, while the Tamboerskloof packs a well-polished punch.