

The Platter Guide hosted its annual book release and awards ceremony in Cape Town in early November. With the Five Star laureates, category winners and various “Wineries of the Year” there are now so many awards that the press release reads a little like a middle school year-book. By 2020 expect the list to include the country's best LGBT rosé producer as well as a special mention for the brandy distiller with the longest beard. What used to be John Platter's personal selection of the top wines he tasted in preparing the guide has morphed into a wine competition in everything except name.

This in itself is no bad thing: the Platter Guide tasters have access to more wines than the judges in any of the reputable local competitions so their list of the country's best wines is bound to be more complete. While it's been said many times that the process by which these wines are identified has its flaws, it's worth adding that it also has its virtues. The first round judging is sighted, so the shortlist of 500 - 800 wines (this year 651, to be precise) which then go to the so-called Five Star tasting (which is blind), can hardly be described as objective. I don't think this is necessarily problematic. Pedigree plays a part in determining a wine's potential: blind tasting can tell you how well it has been made, but for a complete assessment of where it's going it's useful to know how past vintages performed.

What isn't certain is how far this track-record principle is applied, and whether the sifting mechanism is able to respond to anything except the most recent history. Obviously the five star laureates from an immediate past year are more likely to get a pass to the following year's blind tasting, but what about those which performed well a few years back, but not recently? Inertia works both ways. I suspect that wines which have been off the podium for a few years experience an unequal gravitational pull. Newcomers, at least, are free of the burden of history. This doesn't mean they get a free ride: their wines are reviewed by two tasters who must agree before sending them through to the five star round.

The Guide's top wines and wineries deserve the attention which follows the release of the results. The Winery of the Year (for the third time) is Mullineux. The Newcomer Winery of the Year is Erika Obermeyer Wines (Erika was previously the winemaker for the Graham Beck's still wines so her newly launched venture comes to market with her considerable experience). Guide Editor Philip van Zyl has also created an Editor's Choice, the first winner of which is Newton Johnson - identified for “consistent superb quality” across a wide range of wines. No one could dispute the worthiness of this call.

I see no point in making much of the category winners (highest scoring wines within a particular class). By the Guide's own admission, the voting was marginal and based on aggregating the scores of the panel designated to select the five star winners in that category. This may be an improvement on the old “red (or white) wine of the year” but it needs to be more persuasive. The judges weren't setting out to identify the best in class - they were focusing on separating the five star laureates from those destined for the limbo of 4.5 stars.

Probably the book's greatest weakness, at least insofar as the five star selection is concerned, resides in the dynamics (and competences) of the Five Star judging panels. This is evident without nit-picking the results in much detail: eighteen five star chenins but only one wooded and one unwooded five star sauvignon blanc is an obvious anomaly. However, since no competition or selection is free of inexplicable omissions and inclusions, this means that the results, available on <https://winewizard.co.za/article/571>, should be treated not as scripture, but as a useful

enough guide.