

South Africa produces between 7000 and 8000 different wines every year. No more than a thousand are regularly stocked in wine outlets or on restaurant wine lists. Of these, fewer than 200 are “known value items” - mandatory to have on shelf - the wine industry equivalent of Iwisa mielie meal or Hulett's sugar. It's not unreasonable to wonder about the other 6000 or so products - what are they, why does anyone bother to make them, how do their producers get them into the market - all questions about the long tail of the Cape wine industry and how it trades.

For anyone curious about how anything as economically irrational as the wine business even functions, the first consideration - in fact, the first insight - is that for many of the players, the game is not about the money. Anyone will tell you that very few producers make a proper return on their capital investment. A minority earn enough to cover running costs and a provision for the replacement of vineyards and equipment. A tiny minority make real money - though those which do, do very well indeed. The moment you can get your volumes above 25000 dozen and your ex-cellar selling price per case above R400 for un-wooded wines and above R500 for oaked examples, you should be very comfortable. At 40000 cases with an average net price per case of R450 you should be clearing around R5m after paying all your staffing and marketing costs. The really big hitters - 30000-50000 cases annually and an average ex-cellar price of R1000 - are banking R25m upwards. The big problem is that there aren't more than 40 producers in that league, and almost everyone else can only look on, like kids staring through the shop window of the candy store.

There are many who say they don't care: generally they're telling the truth - they're not in the game for the loot. They craft thoughtfully made wines in relatively small quantities, and hand-sell them around the country and to a few select markets around the world. Those of them who know how to talk the talk generate their own following. By repeating an annual circuit of trade events, regional wine shows and wine club tastings they nudge 5000-10000 cases into the market, mainly products selling in the R100 - R200 per bottle range.

Elgin's Richard Kershaw has reasonably small quantities of ultra-premium wines (at higher prices) and a second label to amortise costs through economies of scale. His Kershaw wines have picked up top ratings almost from the first bottling. Every one of his current releases in the “Clonal Selection” series has a Platter 5 star rating. They all price at over R500 - and they're all on allocation. (Small volumes, smart wines, higher prices - it's also a model). His second label - Smuggler's Boot - comes in at about R200 per bottle - not cheap, but arguably the Chardonnay (which I preferred by some distance to the Pinot) is comfortably worth the price. David Trafford's Sjinn wine from Malgas appears to work to a pricing model more in line with Kershaw's Smuggler's Boot. The Sjinn white (chenin, viognier and roussanne) sells for about R240 and is well worth seeking out. The 2014 Low Profile red blend (mainly syrah and touriga nacional) offers enough spice and nuance to justify its R200 price point.

Finally there are several lovely wines from B Vintners (another of the Raats family projects). There are two good Chardonnays (one from Stellenbosch, one from Walker Bay). I preferred the former, given how it's showing at present, and at R150 a bottle it's better value than the latter which sells for about R70 per bottle more. There's also a delicious dry Muscat d'Alexandrie and a very clever white blend (Haarlem to Hope) made with chardonnay, semillon and two different muscats. The current release is also a Platter 5 star laureate. R200 doesn't buy much better value than that.