

The industrial food sector has been getting a bad press, and not only from luddites whose world-view involves an idealised vision of some agricultural Eden. The 1970s and 1980s was the worst era of modern French wine, when even the most heralded producers selected their planting material on the basis of yield, rather than clonal diversity, and then mechanised their viticultural practices. Tractors compacted the soils, agro-chemicals leached their natural vitality. Farming costs dropped, but so did quality. The vines may initially have been less susceptible to disease, but over time their natural resistance also crumbled.

At much the same time the organic farming movement began to make its presence felt, initially as a “new-age” fringe force. It still has that whiff about it - at least in South Africa. When Stellar Organics won a trophy for its shiraz at the Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show a few years back you could hear the more mainstream consumers (and wine press) wondering at the wisdom of the judges. When it repeated its triumph with a gold medal for its Woolworths bottling this year, the comments were more subdued.

In a region as susceptible to summer rainfall as Champagne, Louis Roederer now has over 80% of its vineyard certified organic, and a high percentage bio-dynamic. (Notwithstanding my interest in a company which imports Roederer), it's important to report the results of the recent World Champagne and Sparkling Wine Championships, where Roederer picked up most of the major awards. These included the trophy for Sparkling Wine Producer of the Year, best Champagne, best deluxe Champagne, best French Sparkling Wine, best Classic Rose and best non-vintage Champagne. It's impossible to ignore the connection between this blind-tasting result, and the commitment to organic viticulture. Romanee-Conti and Domaine Leroy, probably the two most prestigious domaines in Burgundy, are both run on bio-dynamic principles. Several of the leading Bordeaux chateaux are also organic, or in transition. Few, if any, publicise this - probably to avoid being thought too “new-age.”

David Clarke, a sometime Australian sommelier who now runs a fine wine distribution business in South Africa and represents several unashamedly “new-age” producers, kindly shared some insights into the next level of this seemingly arcane world, the realm of “natural” wine. On paper, the rules here are simple enough: you can't claim to make “natural” wine if the vineyards are not farmed organically. At the winemaking level, no chemical interventions (except for minimal sulphur additions at bottling) are permitted. It's an honour system, where producer integrity, rather than third party certification, determines the status of a wine.

I tasted several of David's natural wines, and one “orange” wine (in other words, a white wine made with extensive skin contact, and in this case, no sulphur and no filtration, so slightly opaque, and more golden in colour). Craig Hawkins, whose pioneering Testalonga and El Bandito brands have played a key role in opening up this market, was represented by the El Bandito Cortez 2017 Chenin. There's no question about its obvious purity and precision: luminous fruit, very fresh on the palate, low in alcohol, yet full on flavour. Oddly enough I preferred the far less appealing looking white, the Mother Rock “orange” wine of J.H. Meyer. Made in a very traditional way (foot-stomping and punch-downs) nine weeks of skin contact, basket pressed, aged in a concrete “egg” and bottled directly without filtration, it had rich textural qualities to go with the heightened flavours.

Finally David showed me the latest (2017) Intellego Syrah, intense, juicy and peppery, packed with youthful flavour, fruit-fresh at 13% alcohol, and made more accessible by a week of carbonic maceration prior to pressing, aged in old wood and bottled with minimal sulphur. At R170 per bottle, it's a bargain. Given what we now know is happening in the major international appellations, it comes as no surprise that one of South Africa's best shirazes is the result of non-interventionist winemaking.