

The Kanonkop wine estate has been a force in the world of Cape wine since the early 1970s. This may not seem very long in an industry which has been around for over 350 years, but it does pretty much date back to the beginning of the modern era. The first commercial bottlings of Kanonkop were produced in 1973: prior to that the entire production was sold to the wholesalers - whose brands represented comfortably over 95% of all packaged wines sold in South Africa. The wine of origin legislation which came into law that year played a key role in breaking the virtual monopoly enjoyed by the wholesale merchants.

Kanonkop has always been the insider's outsider in wine industry terms. The present owners - Johann and Paul Krige - inherited through their mother who was the daughter of Paul Sauer - a larger-than-life personality and politician, who served as cabinet minister from 1948 and continued as a senator until 1970. The decision to bottle some of the property's wine in the 1970s could not have been lightly undertaken: the wholesalers were conscious of the threat posed by the growing independence of the growers who supplied them with fruit and bulk wine. Typically they threatened to cease buying entirely from anyone who so much as offered a single wine for commercial distribution. While Kanonkop may have been in stronger negotiating position than some of the cellars (partly because of the quality of the fruit, and partly because of the family's political connections) it was strategically important to stay a little under the radar.

The current generation - Johann and Paul - has made a virtue of this necessity. They keep a low profile, hosting a once-a-year roadshow to introduce its new wines (mainly to current members of the estate's mailing list). Kanonkop is present at the occasional regional wine show. It appears from time to time at WineX. There's no drum-thumping, no above-the-line. The tactic has served the estate's image well: the market buys the rarity, the low key commitment to quality, the out-of-the-limelight limelight.

Behind this facade however, the Kriges have been growing the business. Focusing mainly on their Kadette brand (a kind of poor man's Kanonkop - made from mainly bought-in fruit, but still crafted and finished at the cellar) they have increased production dramatically. This in turn has necessitated a major cellar upgrade, which has allowed for an increase in the estate wine production as well as a technology upgrade designed to manage quality in a higher volume environment. A state-of-the-art bottling line costing several million rand has been installed: this is as important for the top-of-the-range Paul Sauer blend as it is for the Kadette wines.

Kanonkop has only had three cellar masters since its first bottled wines appeared in 1973 - each one something of an industry legend: Jan "Boland" Coetzee (now the proprietor of Vriesenhof), Beyers Truter (Beyerskloof) and the current incumbent, Abrie Beeslaar. The wines have changed very little over this 45 year period. In line with climate change, virus-free plantings (and perhaps some pressure of fashion - though this isn't certain) alcohols have risen a little (but far less than most Bordeaux estates over the same period). Pretty much everything in the estate range gets a healthy dollop of new French oak, always from the same coopers. (Johann tells how his father bought their first new barrels for the 1973 Cabernet (which were personally delivered by Mr Demptos himself) at a cost of R78-00 each. Today they cost over R15000.

The wines are consistently good, slow evolving (twenty years at least for the Cabernet-based bottlings) and truly age-worthy. They also come in various large formats - which make them the ideal purchases for people who want something to serve two decades hence at a 21st or other jubilee celebration. They are not priced for the faint of heart (R375 - R595 for current standard range wines in 750ml bottles) but I've never heard anyone complain that Kanonkop wines under-deliver.