

There are not many wines I buy when the new vintage is released: I'm not a collector, I don't need to assemble an unbroken vertical for the mere sake of having the wines. Those who make collections become the victims of them: they cannot open a bottle without destroying the completeness of the line-up. I knew someone who bought every Mouton Rothschild starting from the late 1940s hoping to assemble a complete vertical back to the first of the artist series vintages. He died without completing the collection, and without having drunk a single bottle.

There are exceptions, wines I buy (or try to buy) religiously every year. I do so both to see what the latest releases bring and also to track the evolution of the older wines - tested against their initial promise. In a way, the interest is less in the producers themselves, than in the way the sites from which they obtain their grapes express themselves. This may seem a very arcane route to wine enjoyment but it's enough of an adventure to deserve an explanation.

The great appellations of the Old World have been yielding wine for over a millennium. Generations of growers have come to know their vineyards at a level of detail significantly greater than their counterparts in the New World. Centuries ago they eliminated the varieties which didn't perform well. Nowadays they manage every aspect of the production chain, from the microbial health of their soils to the viticultural and winemaking techniques specific to their chosen cultivars in that site. In short, they are able to extract a more precise expression of origin or terroir than most - but not all - New World producers, many of whom are still trying to decide which varieties have the greatest potential in a particular location.

The dilemma confronting New World producers has been perfectly summed up by Brian Croser, one of the most thoughtful and site-obsessed of Australia's top producers. "The two nagging questions for the committed vigneron are: does my site really have those unique attributes that potentially confer greatness? and am I employing the most appropriate practices to best elicit those site attributes and greatness in the wine? In other words, have I wasted my life nurturing a less-than-distinguished site? Or have I squandered the site potential by inappropriate practices?"

The Cape winemakers whose wines I follow vintage after vintage have come closest to resolving this conundrum in South Africa. Generally they have chosen to work with old vineyards, producing quantities so small that purity of single site is not in dispute: Chris and Suzaan Alheit (Alheit Vineyards), Chris and Andrea Mullineux (Mullineux and Leeu) and, though not totally comparable, Marc Kent and Callie Louw (Porseleinberg). The Mullineuxs have single site syrahs and chenins, all identified by the soil type (Granite, Schist, Iron, Quartz etc) all vinified to optimise fruit intrinsics. Porseleinberg was acquired by Boekenhoutskloof almost ten years ago. Some old vines were retained, though much of the site has been replanted. A combination of younger and older vines contributes to the eponymous wine - consistently one of the most harmonious Cape reds.

With the exception of their Cartology chenin-semillon blend, the Alheits are now single site obsessed - to the point that new oak is never used (because its very presence distracts from the expression of terroir) and nothing is added to the grapes (or the must) other than the essential post-fermentation and pre-bottling sulphur. For Chris Alheit, the art of winemaking resides in getting to know each site so well that no intervention is required from the moment the fruit is harvested until the wine is prepared for bottling. His latest releases are now trickling onto the market, and are worth whatever effort it takes to track them down. Buy what you can get of the single vineyard chenins: if you're forced to choose, the Magnetic North 2017 and the Huilkrans 2017 have it by a whisker from the last ever release of Radio Lazarus (2017).