

For most producers of Champagne-method sparkling wine (known in South Africa as Methode Cap Classique), the whole enterprise is a little like the vinous equivalent of writing a sonnet. The form is both the vehicle and the limitation. The opportunity for genius presents itself out of the discipline imposed by rules. Champagne itself has always been the implicit benchmark, so winemakers - wherever they work - find themselves unable to escape its gravitational pull.

South Africa's Cap Classique producers have been rewarded with booming sales over the past ten or fifteen years, a tribute to their professionalism and the fashion for fizz. Over the same period Champagne imports have doubled. Bubbly has gone from being an occasional celebration beverage (birthdays, weddings and Christmas) to an almost every day aperitif. This is pretty much how it is treated in France, and increasingly in the UK.

However, while Britain has always been a very important market for the French, the rise of English champagne-method sparkling wine, and the Prosecco invasion has seen cross-Channel sales plummet. A cheaper production method coupled together with the more fashionista feel of Italy gave Prosecco a commercial and marketing advantage over Champagne. If you're looking for quaffing wine for a party or as an aperitif, and if the image of Prosecco is as sexy as Champagne in your social circle, why not?

Prosecco is obviously a growing force in South Africa, though it cannot really compete in price against the leading Cap Classiques. Our hand-crafted bottle fermented bubbly carry all the production costs of real Champagne and still get to market at the same price-point in South Africa as the average Prosecco. Proof that the bigger brands appear to be impervious to the Italian invasion has been the extraordinary growth of Krone - in visibility and sales volumes - over the past five years.

Krone - the fizz brand of the Twee Jongegezellen estate in Tulbagh - was one of the first three Cap Classiques in South Africa. Pioneered by Nicky Krone some 30 years ago, it simply ticked along, selling reasonable quantities in what was something of a niche category. Everything changed with the purchase and recapitalisation of the property some five years ago. This, together with the Cap Classique boom, transformed Krone to a front-runner from an also-ran in the bubbly race.

Most of these new sales come from the current release bottlings across white and rose, brut and the increasingly popular Nectar marque. By 2019 the cellar will have seen a six fold increase in literage over a period of less than a decade. Until this year, the laborious business of riddling the bottles was still done by hand: despite the massive expansion, there is still a sense of craft.

Krone winemaker Stephan de Beer manages the hands-on business of meeting the ever-growing demand for the easy-drinking current release wines, while Rudiger Gretschel, chief winemaker for Vinimark and cellarmaster at Reyneke, has the opportunity of working on the single site bottlings and the special cuvées. Here is where one of the great exponents of organic and biodynamic winemaking enjoys free rein to make some quite extraordinary bottles of bubbly.

Playing with fruit sourced from the famous Kaaaimansgat vineyard in the Elandskloof, he has made a couple of special release wines, one with base wine fermented in an amphora, the other (a year earlier) where the chardonnay began life in large oak foudres. He also manages the aged releases sold under the Krone RD label, a concept launched a year ago with the 2001 vintage. The 2002 RD has already made its way into the market, with the earthier and more biscuity 2006 likely to follow soon.

In many ways the massive Champagne house of Moët & Chandon does business has served as a model for Krone: most of what goes into the trade is youthful, technically correct, designed to make sparkling wine a festive drink. But there are special cuvées and aged releases which serious wine buffs ignore at their peril.