

Amongst the most over-worked words in wine presentations in the post-modern world are “terroir” and “sustainability.” Add to these “passion,” “family” and “custodianship” and you have most of the descriptors which require special filtering if you are to distinguish marketing hype from a speaker's sincere intentions.

The terminology is important because, correctly applied, the concepts are meaningful. Site matters if you aim to distinguish between wines produced to an industrial formula and those which express authenticity of place. Where the vineyards really do contribute to the finished product, their continued existence means more than the anodyne hope that the earth - as we know it - will provide sustenance to future generations (sustainability). By the same token, the concept of custodianship is only useful if you recognise the importance of authenticity, which brings with it a duty to preserve those elements which contribute to the uniqueness of the site. People who are in this line of business can defend the use of the term “passion” (there are easier and much more certain ways of making money). This in turn is where “family” comes in - you can't be doing this for shareholders who seek commercial rates of return.

Antony Beck, who runs the eponymous wine business started three decades ago by his late father Graham, is careful about which of these terms he uses to describe his operations, and the vision with which he imbues them. Since the enterprise started on the family's Robertson horse stud, it's safe to assume that initially there was no grand plan. Arguably Graham Beck was simply combining two of the most certain ways there are to lose money - except that with his business acumen this turned out not to be the case. The Beck family is reputed to have one of the most successful horseflesh operations in the world (in Kentucky, rather than in Robertson), and in its latest incarnation the wine business is not a hole in the ground into which they pour money.

The Graham Beck bubbly is probably South Africa's most successful fizz brand. Directed and driven from the outset by Pieter Ferreira, it combines quality, quantity and a house style - the hallmarks of most of the family-owned Champagnes which survive generational succession. Its regular bottlings compete with the very best Cap Classiques, while the latest release of its prestige brand - the 2012 Cuvée Clive (selling at over R700 per bottle) - sits comfortably alongside chardonnay-based bubbly from Champagne's Cote de Blancs.

Beck's next foray into the wine business came with the acquisition just over ten years ago of Steenberg, then a mid-size Constantia property with a focus on sauvignon blanc. There the synergy between an owner willing to invest in long term goals, and a winemaker (JD Pretorius) with the talent and vision to rise to challenge, has yielded equally impressive results. There are several standout wines, of which only one (the Magna Carta) depends to an extent on sauvignon blanc - the variety upon which the property originally made its reputation. The bubbly (Lady R) and the nebbiolo are equally rewarding purchases.

Since Antony Beck has taken over managing the operations he has broadened the vision and at the same time narrowed the focus. A joint venture with Jackson Family Wines' Barbara Banke has seen the launch of the Capensis Chardonnay, easily one of the Cape's finest - with a price tag to match (R900). The latest release is the 2015, with a single vineyard offering (Fijnbosch) due out in the future. Finally there are two pinot noir vineyards in Oregon where the fruit has been processed at a neighbour's winery until Beck's winery is ready for the 2019 crop. Judging from the two vintages I've tasted from each of the sites, the Oregon pinots fill an important gap in the portfolio. They are locally available at around R700 per bottle - a fair price given the buoyancy of pinot pricing generally and the cost of getting wine halfway round the world.