

Not all that long ago South African wine producers and wine drinkers had very little choice when it came to anything other than mainstream varieties - the bulk of which reached our shores in the 1970s. Prior to that there were no commercial plantings of chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, riesling, gewurztraminer, pinot noir, merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot, mourvedre, sangiovese and tempranillo - to name but a few. Initially the varieties made famous by French vigneron crept into our vineyards - the full spectrum of what is required to produce good Bordeaux, Burgundy, Rhone reds and Champagne. The important Spanish, Portuguese and Italian cultivars comprised the second wave, and now a few of the useful gap-fillers have started to appear.

For producers, the problem is that consumers have taken about 30 years to wrap their palates around the first wave varieties: they don't appear to be ready to embrace the next tranche. Moreover, some of the earliest arrivals have remained marginal: even today there cannot be more than ten bottlings of riesling readily available. The same is equally true of gewurztraminer (though with even fewer different current releases about). Both were amongst the very first of the legal imports of the 1970s. They made a bit of an impression originally (the newly constituted Wine and Spirit Board awarded the 1971 Montpellier Riesling the first ever superior seal for a white wine) and then vanished from sight.

Sometimes there's an obvious explanation for this lack of traction: planting a new vineyard is not an investment lightly undertaken, so as soon as it becomes evident that there's no real demand for a newly imported cultivar, most growers will stick with what they know sells. This would explain gewurztraminer and zinfandel - the latter planted at Blaauwklippen in the mid-1970s, and since then at fewer than five other sites around Stellenbosch. This doesn't fully account for riesling's failure to take off: here the culprit was the *ancien regime's* department of agriculture, which permitted producers to use the name "riesling" for wines made from crouchen blanc until fairly recently. No wonder the punters were confused.

Pinot grigio/gris has been making inroads with sales originally going through a single brand (Terra del Capo) and improving so substantially that more and more grape growers have added the variety to their plantings. This in turn has encouraged other wine producers to add the cultivar to their range. I recently tasted the Idiom Bianco di Stellenbosch - the cellar's entry level white wine. Made entirely from pinot grigio, it is accessible, fragrant without being overly perfumed, easy lunchtime drinking and comfortably worth its R100 price tag. Incidentally, the Rosso di Stellenbosch is a sangiovese-barbera blend at the same price point. It's less striking and I suspect the barbera costs it a little concentration. If you're looking for a richer style of Tuscan red, pay the extra for the Idiom Sangiovese. The same is true of Morgenster: the less expensive NU Sangiovese is fresh and interesting enough, but the Tosca justifies its premium.

Despite the prolonged failure of the authorities to accord true riesling legal protection, there are signs that the cultivar is now gaining a bit of a following - thanks mainly to the dedication of the producers who carried on making the wine and then grouped together to raise its profile. Today loyal aficionados are rewarded with fine examples such as Jordan's Real McCoy, Spioenkop, Oak Valley, Paul Cluver (the Dry Encounter as well as the slightly sweeter Close Encounter), Klein Constantia and Hartenberg.

Few though they may be, most of the country's gewurztraminers are authentic expressions of the variety. The ones to look out for here are Nederburg's Beautiful Lady, Paul Cluver, Zevenwacht and Neethlingshof. Finally, if you're looking for something exotic in the way of a refined and delicately aromatic white, it's worth chasing down the Diemersdal Gruner Veltliner. Great intensity on the palate, fresh, yet with a more complex earthy note, it delivers interest, nuance and food-friendly versatility.