

Wine industries the world over love the boutique or garagiste producers. Wine writers gravitate towards them because there's always a story in the tribulations or triumphs of those who appear to live on the edge of extinction. Distributors need them because their wines are always in short supply, which means that they're not hard to sell: you allocate them to grateful customers and use the leverage of rarity to pump out the more commercial products.

Half of the registered wineries (some 250 out of just over 500) in the country crush 100 tons or less. This means that the annual production of 50% of the country's wineries is less than 6000 cases. At a guess, at least half of that 50% sells no more than 4000 dozen. To survive on so little you need to have very low overheads (so very few employees), reasonably high prices and a cost-effective route to market.

Those who are successful enjoy a high profile amongst consumers for whom the meaning of what they are doing is probably at least as important as the contents of the bottle. The fact that very few - if any - of these boutique producers ever enter their wines in blind tasting competitions tells a story in itself: clearly they don't need to, because the small volumes available sell out. Secondly they only have downside risk: what markets their wines is the narrative, the promise of craft. Individuality is what their customers are buying. However, since these wines are necessarily more expensive than some of the more industrial examples, they have to convey the promise of class. A poor showing in a blind tasting competition (which attributes no value to the brand message) may send an adverse signal about quality. It's easier to sell the story, engage with the customers, and keep away from the cold hard space of the judging table.

This doesn't mean that craft wines are bad wines: on the contrary, since these aren't destined for sale in supermarkets, they trade on reputation not on price. If something goes wrong, the owner-winemaker can't risk bottling the result and offering the wine to loyal customers on the database. There's no quicker - or permanent - way of going out of business. However, by the same token, it also does not mean that wine produced in a high volume commercial cellar is bad wine, or even that the production method of these two types of wine is easily discerned in a blind tasting.

There are any number of high volume producers who make fine wines and have sought to upgrade the image of their top cuvées by superimposing a message of craft on them. Go onto the Fairview website and you will find several single vineyard wines each with its unique message - the anecdote which is sometimes embodied in the name of the wine ("Pegleg Carignan") or the sense of place conveyed by the single vineyard appellation ("Jakkalsfontein Shiraz"). For wine drinkers who understand the code, the subliminal message helps to justify the very tangible price. (In the case of the Fairview single vineyard wines, expect to spend R300 per bottle).

The other way to do this is to assume that a different name and a higher price will achieve the same result. You can only think like this if your route to market is a super-highway, so that you can slipstream your premium cuvée onto the wine merchants' shelves behind the bigger volume crowd pleasers. Here is where Van Loveren has had some success with its Christina range. Sold as single vineyard wines, they offer the whiff of rarity, the promise of site and the safe professionalism of one of the country's biggest family-owned cellars. As for the wines worth seeking out: the 2015 Christina Heritage Collection Cabernet Sauvignon and the 2015 Christina Chardonnay are my highest scoring wines from recent vintages. Both are fairly priced, relatively easily obtained and are unmistakably made from the cultivar which appears on the label.