

Lord Tennyson held that in Spring “a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.” In South Africa, however, Spring is auction season. On 7th and 8th September Nederburg hosts the opening salvo; three weeks later the Cape Winemakers' Guild (CWG) wraps up proceedings.

It would take a very distant relationship with the truth to describe the wines on offer at either sale as vinous bargains. Prices - even in these dark times - will average somewhere between R600 and R1000 per bottle. While Nederburg combines an ever smaller array of older wines with younger, more current, releases, the CWG's focus is pretty much freshly bottled stock.

Both auctions now operate with a similar culling system to ensure a rigorous quality standard. Nederburg employs the services of independent experts (of which I was one, together with several brought in from abroad) to sift their submissions in a blind tasting; the CWG's own members perform a similar function - also tasting blind. The former relies entirely on outsiders, the latter is peer-reviewed. While neither is methodologically perfect, it is safe to say that the average quality at both auctions has never been higher.

A fair number of producers have stock on both sales: Groot Constantia, Boplaas, Delaire-Graff, DeMorgenzon, Kanonkop, Le Riche, Rijk's Spier/Frans Smit. Since the Guild itself is a bit of an elite club (guilty of excluding some of the country's best young talent) the range on auction is limited to the forty or so CWG members, making the offering much smaller than Nederburg's. So are the total volumes - a strategy which guaranteed to produce a pressure-cooker sales environment.

Accordingly it's likely that average bottle pricing will be lower at Nederburg - which means that here there may be better value (the term is used only in the relative sense of the word) for the astute shopper. On the other hand, the strong upward movement in the Guild wine prices (2017's average was double that of 2012 despite a slight dip compared with 2016) will certainly bring its own aphrodisiac effect to the auction hall.

If you are seeking some maturity, your chances are better at Nederburg (though Miles Mossop's decision to hold back some of his Maximilian Merlot 2013 and 2011 suggests that the more thoughtful Guild members are looking to provide something more complex than primary fruit). That said, when it comes to really old wine, it's a one horse race: Nederburg has reds going back to 1968, and fortifieds to 1948.

This year's Guild line-up is certainly the most sumptuous to date, with an evenness of quality which suggests that the peer-review system has served its avowed purpose. There are so many good - though youthful - wines that it's impossible to do them justice in a single article: for more detailed tasting notes go to <https://winewizard.co.za/article/537>.

There are two very fine MCCs - the Graham Beck 2009 105 MGA, bone dry yet intensely bready, and the Silverthorn Big Dog IV 2013 - which is seductively delicious. There are also several very polished Chardonnays: the Waterford 2017, the Delaire-Graff Banghoek 2017 and the sublime Ataraxia 2017. Of the other whites, the DeMorgenzon Grenache Blanc 2017, the Mullineux Semillon Gris 2017, the Raats Chenin 2017, the Rijks Chenin 2016 and the Hartenberg Riesling 2016 were all standout examples.

It's just as difficult to shortlist the top reds, given the high average quality: Jan Boland Coetzee's Vriesenhof 2015, Gottfried Mocke's Wine Projects 2017 and Newton Johnson's Windansea 2017 were the most striking pinots, Miles Mossop's Maximilian 2013 the best merlot, Etienne Le Riche's 2015 Reserve Cabernet a fabulous farewell to his time at the Guild, and the Kanonkop Paul Sauer 2015 the top Bordeaux blend. Finally there were three very different but equally worthy shirazes: the Cederberg Teen die Hoog 2015 (a perfectly managed blockbuster), the Boschklouf Epilogue 2016 (utterly Rhone-like) and the silken textured and wonderfully perfumed Boekenhoutskloof 2016: plenty of choice for millionaires wondering what to do with their moollah.