

For most of the 20th century the Swartland, (the region which is now so important to “new wave” Cape wine), was simply a bulk wine source for the wholesalers. In the late 1990s a joint venture between Charles Back (Fairview), Gyles Webbs (Thelema), John Platter and Jabulani Ntshangase (newly returned to South Africa from a job as a wine salesman in New York) became the catalyst for change. Called “Spice Route” and with its original brand home and cellar near to Malmesbury, it brought a fine wine operation to what had up to then been co-op wine space.

The partners appointed as the Spice Route cellarmaster a young graduate winemaker named Eben Sadie. After a few years he moved on, and in the ensuing decade created his own Swartland-based business which became the poster-boy for authentic artisanal winemaking in the Cape. This coincided with South Africa needing desperately to break with the industrial image that years of subservience to the KWV model had inevitably cultivated.

Sadie went on to work with viticulturist Rosa Kruger, scouting out and producing wines from some of the least recognised (and least appreciated) old vineyard blocks in the country. On the way he established a model which served as the blueprint and inspiration for the next generation of landless winemakers to build upon. Almost all of most important players in the world of small volume, single site wine production in the Cape today recognise and acknowledge their debt to him.

There is therefore a direct line from Spice Route to Sadie to the Mullineuxs, who began their winemaking careers at Tulbagh Mountain Vineyards before launching their own enterprise in 2007. Their focus was also older vineyard blocks, their cultivars of choice those which were in relatively plentiful supply in the Swartland - syrah and chenin. Ten years later their most famous wines still depend on both varieties, with the top syrah cuvées from single sites (and marketed with reference to their specific soil types) and the chenin a key component in a white blend which draws on other heirloom cultivars in the Swartland.

I was recently privileged to taste a ten year vertical of the Mullineux white blend. Looking at the wines alongside each other it's possible to identify the coherence of the winemaker's aesthetic vision in the mature (and maturing) wines, while tracking vintage variation and the role played by other old vine components (clairette and semillon gris) introduced more recently.

Within a day I attended another vertical - five different vintages spread over ten years - of Eben Sadie's Palladius white blend. Here again, what united the wines was the aesthetic vision of the creator: selecting the building blocks in sometimes different proportions in order to arrive at a final and coherent whole.

Finally I had the chance of tasting several vintages of a completely different Swartland wine - one of the few new estate ventures in the appellation. About 10 years ago Marc Kent of Boekenhoutskloof acquired Porseleinberg - which included some old shiraz vines which had once contributed to Sadie's Columella. While Kent retained what he could of the old vines (they supplied all the Porseleinberg fruit from 2010 to 2012, despite serious fire damage in 2006), he began a major replanting programme.

Callie Louw, who has been responsible for the vineyards and cellar since the inception, shares with Sadie and the Mullineuxs an aversion to interventionist winemaking. Except for varying the percentage of his crop which is vinified in large oak foudre and concrete

eggs, and the ratio of new to old vines, vintage variation means exactly that. Still, you cannot dismiss the role of the younger vineyards - they now account for around 75% of what goes into the bottle. With the latest release (the 2016) comfortably my best wine in a recent line-up of every vintage produced (and possibly the highest scoring current release on my website), it's living proof that the Swartland is not only about old vines.

For all the tasting notes visit <https://winewizard.co.za/article/554>