

Recent research in the UK reveals that 96% of the wine sold there retails for less than £9 per bottle. A similar exercise in South Africa would probably confirm that less than 4% of all Cape wine trades for over R100 per bottle. (Certainly more than half of all SA domestic wine sales are at under R50 per bottle: at double that amount there's only a tiny percentage of wine left in the ultra-premium bracket).

Richard Hemmings MW, commenting on Jancis Robinson's website about the UK research, goes on to observe “that almost all the content on this site - in excess of 11,000 articles and 160,000 tasting notes, plus the complete *Oxford Companion to Wine* ... is dedicated to just 4% of the wine that Britons actually drink.” The same line of reasoning doubtless applies to editorial available locally on Cape wine. While publications like the Platter Guide and websites like Wine Wizard (home to my tasting notes) cover most wines, irrespective of their selling price, in reality almost everyone who consults these repositories of opinion does so in anticipation of a significantly priced acquisition. You don't open the Platter Guide before buying a bottle of Oddbins or Secret Cellar.

Once you enter into the premium 4% of the market, there's a massive pricing spread - though products tend to be found in clumps (as if the marketing folk who have exposed them to potential ridicule need to surround them in a herd). The higher the prices, the fewer of these groupings per every R100 bracket. There might be three or four between R100 and R200, two or three between R200 and R300 and so on. The more stratospheric the price points, the less the punters are likely to parse them. While this may be true of the domestic market, different rules apply in the international trade. Once you enter the R500 - R1000 bracket (in a duty-free/VAT-free environment) you're fighting for space alongside some big names.

Christies Hong Kong hosted its first Cape wine sale (as part of a wider fine wine auction) in mid-March. The South African selection, which I had helped to curate, included Kanonkop Paul Sauer, Jordan Nine Yards, Vin de Constance, Mullineux Schist and Vergelegen. All the wines sold, with most fetching between R800 and R1000, and a few in the R1000 to R1500 bracket. This places the reds in the same space as Chateaux Lascombes and Rausan Segla (both of which finished in the top ten of the 1855 Classification of the Medoc) with the Vin de Constance alongside some very good Sauternes. Buyers with a budget of R1500 - R3000 (the so-called new 'sweet spot' for aspirational Cape wines in South Africa) could have bought Grand Cru red Burgundies from Domaine Jacques Prieur.

There's more context to this: at the Peech Hotel wine festival in Johannesburg on the same weekend a number of well-known South African producers presented wines which are readily available for R100 to R200 (so in the lower part of the top 4% by price of the local market). I sampled the Avondale Chenin and MCC, the Ataraxia, Springfield and Glenelly Chardonnays, Vondeling's Rose MCC, the Nuweland Old Vine Chenin, and Oneiric's Sauvignon Blanc. All of these wines were delicious, suggesting that there's no real reason to spend much more if you're looking for a decent bottle to go with a meal.

When wines do fetch more than this, it's usually a measure of a willingness to indulge, rather

than a quality-driven necessity. The fact that the Hong Kong buyers had been introduced to the South African wines at a blind tasting against vastly more expensive European benchmarks illustrates this perfectly. They had discovered a new value-quality nexus - and it justified their spending around R1000 on Cape wine, rather than claret. That said, there's nothing particularly reasonable about R1000 for a bottle of wine - unless you're comparing it to the R200k that was paid at that same Hong Kong sale for a 1978 Romanee Conti.