

Weekend golfers don't always envy golf professionals: they know that when the stakes are as high as an Open title it's perfectly possible for a rational human being, under the kind of pressure induced by the occasion, to squander a seemingly unassailable lead at a water hazard. Wine enthusiasts are less likely to feel even a twinge of sympathy for the few (more or less) professional tasters in the wine industry in South Africa. The thought that someone might be getting up in the morning with nothing ahead of him/her other than a vista of 100 wine glasses is unlikely to produce a feeling of sympathy.

There are very few training opportunities in South Africa, and even fewer working slots. I've been running the Wine Judging Academy (which operates as part of the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business) since 2007. In that time we've turned out more than 100 qualified tasters. Only a fraction of the top students ever land an opportunity to put in a stint on a panel, and only a tiny percentage of these get enough work to continue with confidence. In the end, it's a bit of a chicken/egg situation - without experience you can't get a gig and without a gig you can't get experience.

National retailer Norman Goodfellows has undertaken to assist recently qualified judges by creating a monthly tasting schedule where they can gain experience under the tutelage of a couple of senior show judges. Hopefully the training they will get from working their way through large flights guided by highly experienced mentors (Singita's Francois Rautenbach has undertaken to lend his considerable expertise to the project) will enhance their employment opportunities. Then perhaps they too will be able to look forward to those mornings when they can wake up to the prospect of tasting a large line-up of young red wines, starting at 8h00.

What is certain is that a fresh palate, and no labels in sight, changes the way you look at wine. Some producers (usually those whose wines haven't always performed as well as the marketing message promised) maintain that there is something artificial about this kind of exercise. They argue that it's like asking a dermatologist to express a view on human beauty. They're correct that microscopic analysis can lose the wider perspective, but trained judges are not only focusing on defects: they may note technical shortcomings but they're much more concerned about the overall aesthetic achievement. Given that the vast majority of current production Cape wines is fault-free, the work of judging is to assess relative merits.

Out of the past hundred or so wines which have crossed my tasting bench in the past couple of weeks there has been very little junk. What has been extraordinary is the value represented by some of them: the 2017 Buitenverwachting Sauvignon Blanc scored over 90 and sells for R100. Ken Forrester's Petit Chardonnay comes in with a score of 85, and sets you back R59. Beyerskloof's regular 2017 Pinotage costs R85 and scores 88; the Guardian Peak 2017 Shiraz is available at the same price, and actually bags a 90.

Spending more money may not get you a vastly better wine - there's a law of diminishing returns when it comes to increasing your spend - but you will certainly be able to find wines which taste more expensive (usually because of the flavours imparted by the oak) and age for longer. The 2015 Meerlust Rubicon is a perfect example. It's one of the best modern vintages from this historic cellar, and the best bottles (there's a little variation) are sublime. You'll have to pay around R400 per bottle and it would be as crime to drink it so young. This, in turn, is a bargain compared with the 2015 De Compostella (R1150) easily the best release I've tasted of this cult wine - but at R1150 per bottle, not an everyday drink unless you're an oligarch who's escaped from Lenin's egalitarian paradise.