

A couple of weeks back I received a press release hyping the results of a tasting hosted by a local wine distributor/retailer. The “judges” were the company's well-heeled clientele and the line-up had been selected on the basis of SA wines selling for between R1000 and R2000 per bottle. On the surface this must seem like a marriage made by Tinder, a perfect match of luxury-looking wines paired with a roomful of wealthy bidders, useful perhaps as dipstick research, but valueless noise in the world of wine communication.

If you wanted to determine the attributes men seek in women and chose to conduct a survey at Hooters on a Friday night, you shouldn't be surprised to find “large chest measurements” finishing high up on the list. Hooters already knows this and it selects its serving staff accordingly. You wouldn't use this information in a marriage guidance practice.

Then there's the question of the only entry criterion for the wines: all the submissions had to be in the market for at least R1000 per bottle (and not more than R2000 - “in order to keep the wines affordable”). Back to Hooters: if bust size is used to determine employment prospects you don't ask the candidate to submit dimensions using arbitrary and uncalibrated units of measure. Retail wine pricing is significantly more subjective than that. R1000 for a bottle without an established trading history is likely to get you an over-priced wine whose primary appeal is the status it confers on whoever has the disposable income (and fragile ego) to buy it and serve it.

There are other ways of attempting to determine wine quality - and the recent release by the Cape Vintners Classification of its first set of results deserves thoughtful scrutiny. Producers entering wines for this benchmarking event were required to submit five vintages to a blind tasting panel whose job was confirm the consistency of quality across the spread of vintages. After that there were other criteria. Firstly, the five vintages must have been produced from the same designated sites - in other words, they must reflect the potential of the terroir, in addition to the competence of the wine-making. Secondly, that farming practices must comply with the requirements of the Integrated Production of Wine (IPW) legislation. Thirdly, the producer's labour practices must have been audited by an independent body and meet the specifications of the International Labour Conventions' Ethical Trading Initiative. Finally the producer must have a consumer-friendly cellar door environment.

The first public showing of the CVC certified producers contains a largely unsurprising list of players (22 at this stage, with a further 8 pending). Neil Ellis (pretty much the founder of the single site concept in South Africa) Kanonkop, Simonsig, Tokara, Morgenster, Rust en Vrede, Vergelegen, Dewetshof, Waterford, Anthonij Rupert and Groot Constantia are all in the starting line-up. I am, however, a little curious about some names I expected to see there, but were absent. Didn't they enter, or was it that their wines failed to make the cut?

I had been a panelist last year in August at a blind tasting aimed at assessing the quality and aesthetic unity of the submissions, so I was curious to see what had emerged from the process. At the launch event I tasted most of the wines. They confirm what we already know about the strengths of the established cellars (Dewetshof and chardonnay, Kanonkop and pinotage) as well the fit between region and variety. It wasn't difficult to conclude that the CVC methodology beats the wine industry equivalent of seeking a coherent judgement from a bunch of testosterone-charged teenagers whose idea of a good time is happy hour at Hooters. In a world where wine shop shelves are crammed

with an endless display of wines, all bearing a confusing array of stickers purporting to offer a quality stamp of approval, the CVC bottle seal delivers an assurance of some value.

(For the full list of CVC-rated wines and producers go to <https://winewizard.co.za/article/504>.)