

Twenty years ago the established producer community would have ridiculed the idea of developing a wine farming operation anywhere along the Cape Coast between Cape Agulhas and Plettenberg Bay. It wasn't difficult to see the obvious impediments - summer rainfall/high winds, distance from main markets, lack of viticultural expertise amongst the local labour force - before adding the more tangible commercial constraints. It takes between ten and twenty years for a wine start-up to get into positive cashflow, and even longer before the operation can buy its way out of debt (assuming that it ever really does so.)

Even then, of course, a few brave (or foolhardy) souls were doing just that - though some, to be fair, understood they were being self-indulgent. Carel Nel from Boplaas was probably the first to give the enterprise a bash - back in the mid-1980s - when he planted his Ruiterbos vineyards 15 kms from the coast, south of Calitzdorp in the Karoo. I remember visiting the site at the time and instantly grasping the appeal. As the crow flies Ruiterbos is less than 50 kms from what has since become South Africa's Port-wine capital, yet by the late afternoon as the cool sea breezes chilled the slopes it was obvious that varieties like sauvignon blanc and riesling would flourish there. As things turned out, while the location was well chosen, the obstacles won the day.

Ten years later the Elim area near Agulhas saw its first plantings. Once again these were heat sensitive white varieties - mainly sauvignon - and once again issues like wind and bird damage almost scuppered the initiative. However, by then there was a much greater demand for cool climate fruit - and Elim is considerably closer to established wineries. The growers who persevered were able to commercialise their crop more easily, in time acquiring enough momentum to give the appellation the cachet it needed in order to survive.

Over time more vineyard was developed further along the coast - at Baleia Bay near Riversdale (on much the same line of latitude as Hamilton Russell Vineyards near Hermanus), Malgas near Swellendam, Herold near George and around Plettenberg Bay. Some of these adventurous enterprises have battled: distance from the main markets remains an issue - especially if you don't have the inclination or capital to build a winery (a situation which obliges you to sell grapes, or transport them great distances to crush facilities closer to Cape Town). Arguably the most isolated are the most at risk.

By the same token, those which had ready-made markets began to flourish, so that around Plettenberg Bay there is now a vibrant wine community. The town itself is large enough to support the producers through the quiet time of the year, while the booming tourist season gives a much needed boost to sales - just ahead of the next harvest. Kay & Monty makes a really good sauvignon blanc, as does Bramon (which markets a still wine under The Craggs label, but also produces a very creditable sauvignon blanc Cap Classique). Newstead, with a cellar door operation offering dining and hospitality facilities comparable with the best of the boutique Stellenbosch operations - bottles several wines which would do credit to cool climate producers anywhere in the country.

Chief amongst these are a couple of Cap Classiques, a 2014 made from Chardonnay and a really impressive 2015 Rose (85% pinot noir) - delicately perfumed, restrained, and with a very fine mousse. Of the still wines, the chardonnay is pretty and pleasing rather than intense and complex. The sauvignon blancs on the other hand - I tasted back to the original 2012 vintage made from four year old vines - deliver real palate weight and intensity.

In the space of a few decades the quality "Cape" wine frontier has expanded dramatically and now extends to KZN in the east and Landzicht in the Free State to the north. Is Wine of Origin Waterberg totally out of the question?