



The State of Play: The Trophy Wine Show and the Cape wine industry

May 2023 sees the 22nd edition of the Trophy Wine Show - now brought to you by Investec. Twenty one years ago – in early May of 2002 – the judges of the newly launched competition assembled to contemplate the almost 800 entries that had been submitted and to apply the ground-breaking methodology designed to minimise judging and calibration errors.

The guidelines were simple enough: professionally-trained judges working in three person panels, with at least one of the panel members an international judge, using Riedel glasses, with the full class on the tasting bench at the same time. Panellists would seek to arrive at consensus-driven scores, with a show chairman available to resolve differences.

Over the years this model has “discovered” many producers and transformed the commercial prospects of many wineries. The who’s who of the international wine scene have come from abroad to judge at the show: Jancis Robinson OBE, MW (back in the Cape for the 2023 competition) founder of JancisRobinson.com and wine columnist for the Financial Times, the late Steven Spurrier, chairman of the Decanter Wine Awards, Neal Martin, Anthony Mueller and Lisa Perotti-Brown from The Wine Advocate, Michel Bettane and Thierry Desseauve (from Bettane and Desseauve), Neil Beckett and Simon Field (from the World of Fine Wine), Oz Clarke, Anthony Rose, Julia Harding MW, all household names in the United Kingdom, James Halliday and Brian Croser from Australia, Charles Chevalier from Chateau Lafite Rothschild and Philippe Bascaules from Chateau Margaux. The list is extraordinary and the comments and feedback from the greatest figures in the world of fine wine have played a key role in raising the overall quality of South African and the profile of Cape wine abroad.

Despite the positive achievements of the past 20 years, our wine industry is in a wretched state: when the Trophy Wine Show launched in 2002 we had 107000 hectares under vine, farmed by 4346 growers whose fruit was crushed in 428 cellars. Today the vineyard area has shrunk to a mere 90000 hectares and the number of growers has pretty much halved, to around 2600. Only the number of wineries has increased, mainly because of the growth in the boutique brand sector. In 2001 282 wineries (representing 65% by number) crushed less than 500 tons (an average of less than 8000 cases, bearing in mind that 60% of that number averaged less than 3000 cases).

This production segment has now increased to over 380 cellars, over 70% of the country's wineries. This illustrates that while the "craft" segment of the industry continues to grow, the overall productive capacity is in massive decline. When over two thirds of all wineries produce on average less than 8000 cases, and a significant percentage of them sell more wine in bulk than in bottle, it is clear that the industry is facing a crisis. We have hundreds of very small producers making minuscule quantities of wine which are sold on allocation for what appear to be gratifyingly high prices. But we are losing growers at the rate of at least two every week, and vineyards at the rate of a 1000 hectares per year – and have been doing so for two decades.

In these circumstances it is impossible to over-emphasise the importance of the Trophy Wine Show. It has the potential to bring enhanced recognition to our top-performing wineries, together with greater volumes of bottled wine sold - and at higher prices. The outcome of this week's deliberations will make the reputations of newcomers, and burnish the reputations of the better known wineries, helping them to remain in the public eye in the presence of the ever-increasing number of almost "off-grid" producers.

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Issued on behalf of: The Trophy Wine Show
Issued by: OutSorceress Marketing
Contact: Janice Fridjhon
Email: janice@outsorceress.co.za
Tel: 011 482 5936 | 083 302 2197

Contact: Michael Fridjhon, chairman of the judges
Email: mf@reciprocal.co.za
Tel: 011 482 9178 | 083 600 9101

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Website: www.trophywineshow.co.za