

The Trophy Wine Show – brought to you by Investec

Judges' Feedback Session: Thursday 15 May 2025, 11h00 – 12h25

Chairman: Michael Fridjhon

International judges: Michel Bettane (France), Tom Carson (Australia) and Tamlyn Currin (UK)

South African judges: Christian Eedes, Heidi Duminy CWM, James Pietersen, Malu Lambert, JD Pretorius, Eben February and Mandla Patson Mathonsi

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Ladies and gentlemen, are we loud enough? Am I audible; loud enough is the other question. What you probably do not realise, ladies and gentlemen, is that we are here today to wish Christian (Eedes) happy birthday.

There have been times in his life when this was almost a target. Very well done, Christian, you got here, boy. It is great to be here. Thank you all very much for being here; there are lots and lots of thank yous.

I am going to do them first, which is by way of saying to the judges that once we have done the thank yous, unless there is something that you feel was left out and very important, this is much more important to be giving feedback than to say how nice it is to come to Paarl in the middle of winter and have a day like this.

We do appreciate it for what it is worth. Lined up at the back of the room are the unsung heroes who are going to be sung to now. It is the team from Grande Roche: Hendrea, Tyron, Freda, Layton, Teegan, Sisanda, Deshe, Clever, Denei, Curtly, and Clever again.

You guys have been amazing. It has been a long, hard series of days and very demanding panels, which are what we expect with the panels. I would also like to thank Ashley, Dwayne, and Itumeleng, who do this as I think they do it in their sleep sometimes. Partly because they work very long hours, and secondly, I think it comes back to haunt them, so thank you all very much indeed. Thank you to Alex Mason-Gordon, Michael Crossley, to Monica Mountjoy, and to Janice Fridjhon.

The team that makes the team work. Part of what happens here arises from efficiencies, and those efficiencies are immaculate and much appreciated. Thank you in the absence of management from the Grande Roche. We have come back here; we have missed a few years around COVID, but it does feel like home.

It is wonderful to be able to taste and work and live in this space, and that is a pretty cool thing to be doing. I will have lots of numbers for people who want to interrogate them, and they will come back. We have more gold medals this year on average than we have had in the past. Not more than we have ever had, but relative to the number of entries. There is a discussion point which I am sure the team will come back to, over something which we think we are seeing: which is that the top wines are percolating upwards, that the good commercial stays good commercial, and that we are finding this gap in the middle that is both interesting and, I think, challenging in terms of the industry. We have a spread of scores. We have the trophy judging, which has just been held, where everything that comes forward comes forward with a gold medal.

The panellists are allowed to bomb their colleagues, so if you think that a wine really should not have gotten to the trophy judging, you can score a 0 against it, and if that wine was the solitary gold in that class, it could not win the trophy.

It has never happened that a wine has been thrown out of a trophy, but this year we did have a couple of wines that, on average, were disapproved of by the majority of the panel looking at them afterwards.

I think that an interesting sense of one of the most important things about the show is that, though it is collegial, decisions are arrived at by way of discussion and agreement. It does not mean that everyone is unanimous in what they do, and that is also very important and quite exciting.

We had what looked at first like fewer museum class trophy winners. In the end, it was a pretty much average run, with the same number of museums. What we did notice, and I called for the score, was that the museum class wines on average scored higher than the current entry, the current availability wines.

At one level, that is what you would expect. Wines with a little bottle age should be better, more complex, more appealing, but it does remind us as an industry that sometimes, I think, we drink our wines too young. The wines that have had a chance to evolve and go somewhere. We are seeing those figures.

I think that, and I am obviously going to stop talking and hand over, we are seeing some really interesting features for the first time in many years. A Merlot trophy is really encouraging because, as those of you who attend this feedback session have heard, on almost an annual basis, the moans and groans about how we are not doing Merlot properly.

There is new planting material, there is new, more thoughtful winemaking, and the results have percolated to the surface. I am not sure whether I can unpack the idea of weak and strong classes, and that will come out in the discussion. There are classes that have gotten many gold medals — that is not just a function of the size of entries, but the fact that they are classes that the industry does very well.

It does not mean that they are perfect classes, and it also means the judges, in a sense, are more tolerant over a spread of styles, so when you see a Shiraz class with four or five golds or a Chardonnay class with four or five golds, what it is telling you is not only that it is a strong class, but there are different ways of interpreting those varieties, and that is very important.

I think that one of the most important things about this session, and it has a history, is that long ago, when we used to do the SAA wine judging, and we had lots of international judges who came to South Africa because our airline flew internationally and gave them tickets, and they came here.

We discovered really early on, in 1994, that what the international judges had to say was so important that it kind of broke the echo chamber that the industry had been so comfortable in, in that era of isolation.

And we are a long way past that now. It has been 30 years since. We have international judges, some of whom are here for the first time, some have done it a few times before. We have an extraordinary array of judges. I sat there in the judging rooms looking at how senior judges, who have been doing this on and off for anything from five to fifteen years, engaged with the wines and engaged with each other.

In that sense, we are a different kind of echo chamber, but it is really important and it always amazes me that the industry does not recognize that this opportunity, this one to one and a half hours of talking to people who have absolutely cutting-edge pallets, have a vision of a much wider wine world. They are here for engagement, for discussion, for asking the probing questions, not for this kind of feel-good wrap-up to three days of judging, so please make the most of that opportunity as well.

Just some very basic statistics: slightly more entries than last year, but 20%, 25% more gold medals. Count is almost identical on silvers and slightly higher up on bronzes, but not significantly so.

What is most interesting is the gold medal spread is across many classes, suggesting for the first time in many years that we are doing more than just 1 or 2 varieties very well indeed, and more niche variety than we have ever had, more niche white, niche red, interesting blends, lots of things happening which make me feel good about how the industry is making its way forward in the 21st century.

I am going to pass the microphone up and down the line a bit, but instead of doing what I always do and make everybody say something, so the poor person who is number 10 in line thinks that everybody has had

a chance to say something, I am going to start with Tamlyn on my right, whose first international judging gig is this year, so it is going to be a fresh view.

Would you like to just say what struck you most and what things you would offer as a message to the industry about what we might still be focusing on if we want to go somewhere?

TAMLYN CURRIN: Thank you, Michael. I think this is on. I have got a very loud voice anyway, so I probably do not need the mic. Do I need to stand?

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: No.

TAMLYN CURRIN: Okay, good. I was lucky enough to start with the Chenin panel and it really is something that is very special for South Africa. The quality across the board was high across all of the different styles, from fresh, light, entry level, all the way up to even the quite rich oak style, maybe some with a little bit of residual sugar. On the whole, South Africa seems to have got an incredible handle on Chenins, and likewise on the second day with Chardonnay, I found the same thing.

I think if I were going to have a message about all of this, the question that is being asked throughout the time is the comparison with France, and South Africans just have to drop that comparison.

You make South African wine. Embrace your climates, embrace your soils, embrace your fruit, but also it is a national personality: you are a pretty open people, you are direct.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: That is a message for South Africans.

TAMLYN CURRIN: Yes. There is a lovely kind of feet-on-the-ground openness. I can taste that in the wines, so I think stop talking about whether your Chenin is like the Loire, it is not. All the better for that. It is not to say that Loire Chenins are worse, you know, it is not about the comparison, and France does French wine beautifully. You guys just do South African wine beautifully.

I think it was the same with tasting the MCC class. Again, this is a sparkling wine that is in a completely different style, and it is unique to South Africa. Lean into that. I think that is enough from me.

TOM CARSON: Thanks, Michael. I think the thing that struck me most, I suppose, is the improvement in Shiraz. Coming from Australia, which you know is the home of Shiraz for us, there is half the country that is planted to Shiraz, and we have the oldest vines in the world, dating back to the 1840s.

Shiraz is big. Every winery in Australia would make a Shiraz, and being a judge here in 05 and 13, I cannot remember being particularly impressed with the Shiraz back then, and in fact, I think we struggled to get golds. We had numerous golds in the Shiraz class. In fact, it was the strongest red class in the show in terms of gold medals given.

Not that I am trying to give away the results, but it was very strong, and we saw that in the trophy line-up, and what struck me about the wines was the vibrancy and the intensity. You have in Shiraz these really beautifully-handled red fruited wines, florals, beautiful colours, medium bodied to slightly full bodied.

A new style that is developing in South Africa, which you know was early, similar to the cool climate Shiraz in Australia, so maybe defying the heat of some of the regions you have got, with very smart viticulture and really thoughtful winemaking, not overdone.

I hardly had an over-oaked wine all week, which is something that is important. The handling of oak, new oak, plays a very important role in wines. We do not need to see it from 3 kilometres away; it needs to sit in the wine.

The Shirazes were very compelling; they were really interesting, so that was something that I thought was a real development. I think across the board, and the trophy line-up, I am seeing much more purity, finesse, and elegance in the wines. That is one of the things. Probably at the bottom end of the reds, there are still a lot of red wines that have been hanging on the vine for way too long.

I do not know what you are trying to achieve with them, but pick them a bit earlier. They are sort of big, clunky, brown-looking wines at very young ages; they are not very appealing. They are not very appealing to the judges; they are not very appealing to consumers, I would assume. People pick up wine, they pick it off the shelf, and they are drinking it these days; they are not looking to sit something in the cellar forever, so balance, vibrancy, and varietal correctness are really important.

And the best wines in the show certainly showed that. Chardonnay, I was blown away by the Chenins. Chardonnay is a very strong variety in Australia, so I have particularly high standards with Chardonnay, and I think that there were some good wines there, but there is still a lot of room to improve.

People are getting the picking a little less ripe. I mean it is fine to make big, textured, full-textured Chardonnay, that is certainly part of the style, but there is a place for more coiled, more tight, more minerally, more complex wines.

I think there is a lack of somebody having a bit of a go, going out there, and going a bit further. The wines were a little bit safe, and I think you can do more with Chardonnay. I think you can work on some cooler sites, I think you can work on phenolics and your use of oak, your wild ferments.

Make some really interesting, complex wines. You can see the fruit's there but the winemaking needs to be bolder. I think it is a bit safe with Chardonnay, a bit afraid to go out of, oh, my consumers, that is what they like, that is our style.

You know what, if you make great wine, people will come and buy. You cannot make assumptions about your consumers; you need to continue to make the best wine you possibly can and keep pushing yourself. Shiraz has come a long way, I think Chardonnay can do the same.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Thank you, Tom. One of the observations, just to pick on the point you have made, in the classes where we have the most gold medals, we had the highest number of non-medals, and there is this polarisation. We are seeing it. The single exception to that is Chenin Blanc.

The number of non-medals in Chenin Blanc is exactly the same as gold medals, so there is this huge concentration in the middle of really smart, decent, medal-worthy wine, all the way up, whereas the ratio of non-medals to gold is 4-5 times in those big classes. That includes Chardonnay, it includes Shiraz, it includes Sauvignon Blanc, amazingly, we all talk about how well we do it, and it includes Bordeaux Blends and Cabernet.

The single exception to that rule is just how that middle ground has been achieved by Chenin Blanc.

PARTICIPANT 1 (Emile Joubert, Die Burger): Tamlyn and Tom, concerning the Chardonnay section as well as the Chenin, were you asked to judge the un-wooded wines and the wooded wine separately, or was it one combined offering?

TAMLYN CURRIN: I believe, to answer slightly differently, in the Sauvignon it was divided, but in the Chardonnay and Chenin we tasted them mixed up, which is really challenging, but it is also very interesting because it keeps you quite sharp. Then what you are focusing on is the quality of the wine, no matter what the winemaking is behind it.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: I am going to ask Michel now, just because you have some hope.

MICHEL BETTANE: I like this competition very much because it is one of the very few where you can share your judgment with the other judges, where you can share your experiment, you can share your love, your hate. Sometimes, even for a judge, to love to hate is not exactly what we are expecting from a good judge.

What I – with my age, and more than 50 vintages in my memory, everywhere in the world – I would say that the wines do not belong to nations. The good wines belong to humanity, but first it belongs to the soil, to the place, to the light, to the weather, to the microclimate.

It belongs to the dreams of the people who want to make wines in these places. You have to dream and to build the wine of your place and not your nation. You can have many styles, oaky, not oaky, we can have endless discussions about what is the right ripeness.

What is important is the idea, the winemaker, the owner of the property, is making the wine that he dreams of for the place where the vines are planted. And it is not my first trophy (Trophy Wine Show), it is my 3rd one, and in 20 years, it has shown a lot of improvements have been made in the wine industry.

I am very happy to be able to understand that, to feel the sense of improvement. As for the medals, the trophies, the Russian sheep, in every country, every place, you have over-average wine, dull wine, very good wine, excellent wine, and worldwide wines. In smaller countries, it is because it is like that.

It is impossible to have perfection everywhere, and what is very important is to have the sense of perhaps what is needed by the place, and not by the consumer. We also have to educate the consumer; it is not only about the immediate taste of the consumer.

My immediate taste when I was younger was not good at all, I can tell you. What is very important is to follow the change of time, the change of habits, and the change of eating.

The cooking now is not the same as 40 years ago; what we are eating is not the same, it is normal. In 40 years, you have evolution, more freshness, that is how it is. I am very happy to see that happening here, with people who love to eat, who love to be together.

Keep these qualities, which are the friendships, the love to be friendly with many people, to be generous, to have a very generous hospitality, and I was very proud to be here for the 3rd time of the judge panel for this trophy. Thank you, Michael.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Thank you, Michel. Will you pass the microphone to Eben at the back there? This is now your second time as a (senior) judge.

EBEN FEBRUARY: Second time, that is correct.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: As a judge, I am going to ask you and I am going to ask Malu what it is like to be there, but more importantly, the benefits of the other panellists that you work with, because I think one of the things we look for here is the idea of continuity and that there is a process of not so much learning.

Everyone who is a full judge is a senior judge; there is no kind of pecking order in that, but there is an experience that you gain over the three days of the show, and that experience, I think, stays with you. But I want you to talk about it, and if I am wrong, say it loud and clear.

EBEN FEBRUARY: You are wrong. Yes, for me as a judge, sitting here for the second time, it is great because the international judges have a lot of experience that they are bringing to the table, and seeing Michel judging was an excellent experience for me. Learned quite a lot. How we judge the wine, compared with the international judges, played a big role.

There were some valid points that they brought up in the discussions, where we would rate it very high because we found it very fond, we enjoyed the wine style because we are South Africans, but they did not like it that much. So, then there was a good, not an argument, but a discussion about the wine.

Why we enjoy the style and why he does not enjoy the style, but we learned a lot and, going forward, hopefully from next year, this is something we can take place in, we can consider thinking of the wines, and yes, we learned every day, and there was some valid feedback some of the associate judges brought.

There were some associates who pulled out some high silver, some gold, and there was a good discussion about the wine. I think overall it was a very good experience, and the inputs that we gave. It was great. The wines were a bit challenging, to be honest. We did Cabernet Sauvignon, and everyone thought that Cabernet was going to be a Bordeaux Blends; it was going to be a great class, it was going to be a lot of medals.

It turned out to be very challenging, looking at the vintage. I mean, 2022, 2023, if I am correct, yes, it was very challenging, but the wines that we did bring up were super elegant, showed beautiful complexity, beautiful structure.

MALU LAMBERT: Hi guys. So, this is my first year on the Trophy Wine Show panel (as senior judge). Thank you for having me. It has been a lot of fun, and I am sorry if anyone in the room here has been waiting for an email reply or a WhatsApp. You kind of just get lost in this bubble of wine, time stands still in the room, and you just connect with each other, and you connect with the wine, and the real world totally falls away, so I will be replying later.

I was very lucky in the fact that I got to taste with all three of the international judges, and I found that really compelling because I got to see their points of view in our wines, because we get so stuck in our bubble as local judges that it really is refreshing to get that outside point of view, a different perspective, and that is what these international judges bring.

It was also a real privilege to be in the room with them, to hear from Tamlyn. I mean, she is my favourite writer, hands down, and it was just an honour to taste with her. Tom, brilliant, so precise, you cannot get a funky wine past him, and Michel, I could listen to all day, he meanders down a path of beauty with wine, and I really just appreciate him. Thank you very much for all the tasting.

In terms of the atmosphere in the room, it is super-collegiate. We all have our discussions, we all have our points of view, nobody must fence it, we do not like that. You either like a wine or you do not like a wine, and you flag it, and we discuss.

There is no middling, there is no averaging, there is, do you like it and do you not like it, and why. That is the part that I enjoy the most. I enjoy the discussion, I enjoy learning from people, and I just want to say, the associates, you have to be an associate for a long time to get in the panel.

I did 3 years as an associate, and they are brilliant. We had amazing associates this year. Just to look at the talent that is up and coming, I am excited.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Thank you, Malu. Just some statistics apropos Eben's point about the reds. Bordeaux Blends and Cabernet, since the one is kind of attached to the other, both classes have around 60 wines, in fact, both 59. Both had 2 golds out of 59 entries, and in the case of Cab, 20 non-medals, and in the case of Bordeaux Blends, 11 non-medals but 39 bronzes.

And one of the questions that maybe he will tease out is the vintages that we have seen from 21 to 25, which everyone is so excited about. Not great vintages for Cabernet, and it is not surprising, the porosity of golds given the line-ups.

I would like to pull some questions from the floor. Does anybody want to start, interrogate, or ask a question? I will find someone to answer it. We need a microphone here for Jono.

PARTICIPANT 2 (Jono le Feuvre): Michel, you mentioned that we need to educate the consumer, which is a message that kind of flies in the face of almost every other retail industry that is going on, you should listen to the consumer. So, my question here is, what direction should we be educating them towards? What is the goal of the education?

MICHEL BETTANE: It is like any education. First, a discussion about taste. It is the beginning of civilisation when people say there is no discussion, each person has their own taste. It is like that, it is the beginning of barbarianism.

Discussion about taste is the beginning of civilisation, sharing the experience. We are all different genetically; we are all different. The sense of taste is genetically linked to each patrimony; it is normal, but it is the social part of life to have more things in common.

In the matter of wine, you have the notion of balance, which is very important. This is the most important feature for good wine. It is not only because it is a good drink or because you prefer to drink wine to any other drink, but also because this is a problem for the future.

Why do you drink wine? Why do you not drink soda or orange juice? It is because it is your choice, and your choice is your choice, but you can have, and with age and with experience, at the beginning we love, when we do not often drink wine, we love to have a hot sensation, a very immediate one, then evolved. When you drink wine every day, you have a smoother taste, you prefer things which are more complex, but it is normal, it is your taste. We have to educate you to have a better appreciation of your own taste, not ours. We have to understand you. Through education, you can make improvements in your own direction.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Thank you. Microphone there, yes?

PARTICIPANT 3: This is for Tom. You said varietal correctness, can you define what you mean?

TOM CARSON: In the Cabernet class, for instance, at the bottom end of the class, I could have been judging any red wine class, there was no varietal character in the wines, it had been stripped out of them, by I do not know how.

Mainly over-ripeness and leaving the fruit out there for too long, and not picking it when it has some vibrancy. So, I think that there are two ways to look at it. When you are judging a varietal class, you are looking for varietal character and then complexity on top of that.

In blended classes, you are trying to use the best of each variety to contribute to that, but if you are not picking the variety at a time when it is expressing its true nature, then you are not achieving the best result for the wine, and I think that is something important. It is the freshness in wine; it does not mean early picking, it means picking the grapes when they are perfectly ripe.

When they are perfectly ripe, they have a balance of 4 components: flavour, phenolics, sugar, and acid, and if we are growing grapes on a good site, those 4 components all work to a similar time zone, and if your viticulture is good, you can pick grapes that have this inherent vibrancy and balance.

That comes through to the wine; you do not have to adjust so much if you have got those 4 elements in a nice little space. That is what a good terroir is, when you have the right variety on the right soil in the right microclimate, and you are picking grapes that have this vibrancy and intensity.

If you have some of those components out of whack, then you lose the vibrancy of the wine, and I think young red wine should have a very good colour, that is the first thing. A lot of the wines suffered from poor colour at 18 months old, browning already, so there is something lost, there is character that is gone, it is oxidised, it is never coming back.

Picking and then very thoughtful winemaking are important. We talk about terroir, but terroir includes the winery and the people who are making the wine. The winemaker is not the most important thing, but he can be if he does it wrong, because his stamp will be bigger than anything else, because I am tasting the wine, and I am like, where is the character in the wine? Where is the sense of place?

It is not there because the job was done poorly, so you have to have everybody working in sync, you have to have the viticulture really right, you have to have an understanding of your site and when to pick your grapes, and then you must have a vision, as Michel said, a dream. What is this wine? What should it be? How do I bring it to life?

So, it is two years of work to get and produce a great bottle of wine. Vineyard, wineries working in sync, and I think the best wines are the wines that leap out of the glass, they have beautiful colours and have aromas, and sometimes you do not need to taste, you can smell and go, this is an absolutely brilliant wine.

If it backs up on the palate, which I am sure it will, by the look of it and by the smell of it, you are there. So I think they are the wines that I am looking for. I am not looking for flat, unvarietal, non-descript red wine; anybody can produce that.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Right, Mac, there, yes.

PARTICIPANT 4: Thank you, Michael. Just a question for you. Is it correct to say then that the Bordeaux class is the worst-performing class that you judged this year?

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Absolutely not. We have had years where it has been like that, but it has certainly been a difficult class. In fact, the really nice thing about this year is that there were no really crummy classes. We had two or three very strong classes, but that section there, they all had medals, which is rare, and that is one of the reasons that the gold medal count is up this year.

Classes that were previously, 2 or 3 years, we have not necessarily seen a Pinotage gold, a Merlot gold, a Rhone Blend gold. Those are the wines that came in and helped, but it is interesting that the Bordeaux varieties were a smaller proportion of the red wine golds. Another question, otherwise I am going ... yes?

PARTICIPANT 5: I have one, Michael.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Jacqueline, yes?

PARTICIPANT 5 (Jacqueline Lahoud): Thanks. Not directed at anyone in particular, so anybody can select to answer it, but it is in terms of the panel. I am interested to know, because there are a number of members on the panel that have been on the panel for a number of years, and yes, there are some new faces, but is this a good or bad thing in terms of the sameness of a panel? Does it lead to good consistency when judging wine, or does it lead to a little bit of sameness and not allowing newbies to be recognised as such?

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Great question. Because we do rotate the panels, we have got, I mean, we could work with the same panellists year in and year out, because we know the ones that are good, solid and reliable. We also have to build capacity, and we also have to change panel dynamics. So in fact, I am going to throw this question at your colleague Christian, who is back here this year after an absence of a few years.

Was that good for you, as in, was it interesting to see how things have changed, and do you feel that there is a different dynamic as a result? Christian?

CHRISTIAN EEDES: Thanks, Michael, thank you for that question. Jacqueline, thank you for putting me on the spot. A couple of points. It was great having Malu on board and the associates, and at one point with Malu... there was a lot of debate about stylistics and particularly in the case of Syrah, what you might term hipster wines and early pick and very whole bunch driven.

Tom made a memorable remark that you cannot make Beaujolais out of Syrah, to which Malu countered that that is the kind of wine that she wants to drink when she goes out to your wine bar in Cape Town, and I think somewhere in between lies the truth, and that is one reason why you need a multi-generational panel.

I do not go to wine bars anymore, I am too bloody old, as much as I might like to. So that is point number 1. Point number 2, yes, obviously, the succession has issues, and we do need to build capacity.

I do not necessarily want to have to taste 60 Cabs in a day, once every year, for the rest of my life. It is physically and mentally exhausting, and at some point in the not-too-distant future, I just want to drink the really good stuff rather than working through 60 wines in a day and having to encounter ...

I do not entirely agree with Michael, if I might just say. I think Bordeaux Blends and Cabernet at the very bottom end are extremely concerning. I am not saying they were categorically the worst on show, but we have got strategic issues.

They demand a premium in the marketplace, and those wines are very problematic. Sorry, I am moving a little bit away from the question put to me, but Michael did ask me what I noticed this time around, not having judged in 2 or 3 years. As I say, it is a strategic issue.

Why are our Cabernet-based blends looking the way they are? I am not going to hog the mic, but I have got some thoughts on that.

TAMLYN CURRIN: Can I just ... as an outsider coming in, from what I have observed, and an answer to your question, the thing that impressed me most, because each panel is made up of obviously a very experienced chair who has done it a number of times, and then an international judge, a senior judge, and an associate.

What impressed me most was how much discussion there was, so when there were differences of opinion, everybody's opinion, even the associate judges', I found on the panels that I was on, everyone's opinion was given equal weight, even though the associate judges' scores are not counted; their opinions were very carefully listened to.

There were some bolshy people in the room, but all of them, also the quieter people, were listened to, and I think there was a sense of different perspectives being taken on board, and I did not feel that it was very echo-chambery.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Thank you. I am going to pass your question in a strange way to Heidi, from two perspectives, because I want to go back to Jono's question as well, about education and what the point of education is.

Heidi is the principal of the Cape Wine Academy; she gives her life to education. What do you think about the two extremes of the question? One is consumers becoming, it is a bit elitist to say so, more sophisticated, Michel's point, and Jacqueline's question about capacity and capacity building?

HEIDI DUMINY: You know you are wrong, Michael. I give my life for bubbles. So, first of all, I am in what I consider to be a super privileged position because I am brought in a day before the sparkling wine panel to lead that, and for me, that is a massive privilege.

Also, because the sparkling category is different, judging bubbles is different. You have to adjust your palate perception as soon as you introduce a bubble into a wine, and a lot of very proficient judges of still wine do not quite get the nuance of sparkling wine, particularly if you have not seen the greater picture and progression of the category.

This is something I really do feel very privileged to be able to do, and it is another way of not limiting the local judging pool to just 6 judges, where it is shared. We really are working so hard on trying to incubate sparkling

wine palates, in order to, with the Cape Wine Academy and in partnership with the Cap Classique Producer's Association, to build a wider pool of bubbly judging experts.

I think that is also a little strategy that was brought in that works for mutual credibility, specifically for Cap Classique. And in terms of education, yes, I am super-passionate about education. I do not believe that you have to learn about wine to appreciate wine, but it certainly helps.

It certainly helps to be introduced to it. It is not something that you discover just by chance; it is something that we totally have to work on with our new consumers in South Africa. Not even new consumers, it is a market that is interested, is curious, and is showing signs of really wanting to elevate their knowledge.

Because of the curiosity and because of the social, cultural advantage it gives you at a dinner party, and in places that we all socialise, and in terms of connection, I really do believe that education should be ... anyone who learns about wine should be able to learn about wine on their own terms and be where they are, unapologetically.

The intimidation factor is tricky for me, because it is not a case of this whole thing of wine is snobbery and protecting wine is snobbery and elitism, because wine is where you are, you just have to have a place where you can learn more if you are curious.

JAMES PIETERSEN: Definitely. I think a sense of place is very important. I was privileged enough to actually judge sparkling with Heidi, as always. I think this was actually my second time this year judging with Heidi.

I am very passionate about Cap Classique, and a sense of place is very important, and I would just like to add, on top of what Tamlyn said, in terms of talking about South African wines instead of benchmarking ourselves with the French wines. Champagnes are also very important, because the consumers out there are always comparing Cap Classique with Champagnes, but if you look at it, Champagne is quite cold, cool climate, whereas yes, we have a bit of cool climate, but we have sunshine.

Our Cap Classiques are a bit brighter, and we are starting to see our Cap Classiques a lot more refined, which was really amazing. This year we got a little bit more Cap Classique compared to last year. I think it was 4 more Cap Classique compared to last year, and the colour difference was really amazing, and even the silvers that we pulled, the golds that we pulled.

You can literally walk in the room and look at the colour, and you will be like, I am really impressed, so we are starting to see a lot more improvement in the Cap Classique. But I was also privileged enough to judge Merlot, which is always a difficult class, by the way.

It was the first class that I judged this year. Monday, I walked into the room, and there were 10 Merlots poured in front of us before the white wines, and I love tasting red wines before the white wines because of the acidity factor.

The other thing is, whenever we are judging Merlot as judges, we are looking for those sophisticated Merlots, purity, little bit polished, but the consumer out there is looking for something totally different, because Merlot in South Africa is considered cheap.

A consumer walks into a retail store, it is almost like Rosé, it is like a commercial wine, but we are starting to see a lot more serious Merlot, of which we managed to pull a gold this year, which is very impressive. We are looking forward to seeing what it is. Thank you.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Thank you very much. In the room, are there any more questions? Thank you. A microphone, Emile, yes?

PARTICIPANT 7 (Emile Joubert): Pinotage. Who are the culprits who judged Pinotage?

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Who chaired the Pinotage panel?

EMILE JOUBERT: And how big was the entry cache?

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: The Pinotage entry, I will tell you now, was ... who chaired that panel, by the way?

FEMALE SPEAKER: James.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: James, goodie, pass the mic to him. Pinotage, there were 31 wines, 1 gold, 10 silvers, and 15 bronze, (only) 5 out of the medals. Let me tell you, go back 5 years, and they would have been 20 out of the medals and one or two silvers.

EMILE JOUBERT: What is going on with Pinotage falling into one style? We need to look at a more refined interpretation of the variety. Obviously, it is only 100 years old, so the journey has only just begun, but have you seen a progression in the styles of entries, not only in your judging in the past, but in your general assimilation of Pinotage?

JAMES PIETERSEN: It is great to be able to talk about Pinotage in its 100th year. I have done quite a few Pinotage panels in the past, and it has become a really exciting panel to sit on. This year we had a lot of fun. I think previously I have sat on a panel with Heidi and a few other of my colleagues here.

Generally, it is wonderfully complex in that we are finding our way. Michel was on the panel with me, and he said, "But you guys must decide what Pinotage must look like, what is the shape of the wine?" What I do like about this year's little section that we got is that the wines are a little bit more reined in; we are seeing less and less of that big, buxom, sweeter style. I do think that it is a legitimate style, a little bit of a structured shape to the wine, a little bit of sweetness, but what was really beautiful is that the tannins in Pinotage set it apart. Then it has the parentage of Cinsault and Pinot Noir, both very fruitful varieties, fruity, red fruit, all that kind of stuff.

So the fruit needs to be put into a box, given a bit of shape, so we have seen beautiful shape in Pinotage, and I think the gold we have pulled out is a beautiful wine that is clearly a Pinotage; it has all of the elements, floral, it has a little bit of that banana loaf on top.

It does not hide its tannins, and it has got nice dryness and a nice bite at the back, and I am really looking forward to where we are going to go with it. And I think that it is a variety that is crucial to the South African story.

Every person that visits South Africa is going to want to drink Chenin Blanc and Pinotage, so the better we are at producing the wine, the better we are at talking to the wine, the better we are at bringing it into our culture, the better we are at understanding how to use it, where to drink it, what to do with it, I think the better for all of us.

I think it is a legitimate variety and it has a distinct tannin structure that sits in a different place to Cabernet Sauvignon, to Nebbiolo, to Pinot Noir, to Cinsault. That kind of tannin structure, that dryness, that has a little bit of personality, that needs to be celebrated.

So, Emile, in short, I am quite excited about the variety. I think it is morphing, it is trying all kinds of different dresses, it is trying to find a different shape, a different way to dance, and we are all part of that journey, and I think we should celebrate it. And I think the story and the language around it are what we need to develop.

This is probably the one variety where we can very easily get to what does a South African wine look like, and whether it is going to be the greatest red wine in the world. Who knows, 500 years from now, but that is where Pinotage is.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Thank you. Yes, you need a microphone, or else we will get shot down in flames, you know what that means.

PARTICIPANT 8: I know that the idea of a cultivar, I mean Burgundy, has had 2000 years to figure out what Pinot Noir is, so it is not a little premature to figure out what Pinotage is, and it has not been 100 years, we have probably only been making it for 50 or 70. But would you view that there is a growing trend for winemakers to take Pinotage off the skins while fermentation is still going, in order to deal with those tannins? Would you say that is an interference with Pinotage, or do you think it is a smart move to polish the end result?

JAMES PIETERSEN: When it comes to winemaking, I am not a winemaker; I am not a qualified winemaker. What is really crucial is that a winemaker has an aesthetic vision of what he wants to make, from the place, understanding the variety, reading where he wants to be, and he has to have a clear view that has an artistic kind of vibe about it.

What does he want the person on the other side to experience when he drinks the wine, and then the winemaking is part of his methodology, and he is cooking and interpreting his place, the quality that he has got in the vineyard, and then what he wants the person to experience?

That experience has to, if you want to make great wine, go with emotion, with language, and with life, because otherwise we are just making beverages, and there is so much competition out there when it comes to beverages.

When it comes to wine, we really have to build emotion into how that person is going to experience it, and we need aesthetic direction. So we need winemakers and viticulturists who understand where they want to go.

The story of methodology is purely part of the recipe, and trying and learning, it is a journey, and we should all be super-excited about it. And the way that we communicate about it is really the future. Communication, marketing, is the next level of wine, that is the future.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Thank you, very nice answer. Any more questions from the room? Yes, microphone, please.

PARTICIPANT 9: I am afraid it is my annual bleep, Pinot Noir.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Interesting, who chaired that panel? It was, it is an easy one then.

JAMES PIETERSEN: Pinot Noir, and we have some esteemed Pinot Noir makers in the room as well. Pinot Noir continues to be a challenge. It could be the sample sizes we are looking at, but I think that Pinot Noir is obviously a very delicate grape variety. I think it is crucial that it has the right home and place where it is planted, vineyards, clonal material, so the first part of that story has not been answered yet. So, before we can have the right viticulture, we still have to find the right place.

There is quite a bit of a journey in terms of place. We have one area that is really developing nicely, but the vineyard has been replanted a few times, and the clonal material is starting to be established, and the vineyard age is only now starting to go over that 15–20-year period.

I think Pinot Noir is just, it is a slow growth as a varietal, and the expectations and benchmarks internationally are extremely high. We also have a wine that has got Pinot Noir on the label, and it has got so much expectation, so it is almost ready to fail. Unlike Merlot, where people drink it and it is juicy, and they go for it, or Shiraz, Pinot Noir has got a lot of expectation, and I just think it is a real work in progress, and it seems that we are saying that all the time, but baby steps.

There are amazing Pinots in the country, but there are very few of them, and should those be the leaders in terms of the class we look at here, it is tough; there are a lot of issues here, unfortunately.

PARTICIPANT 9: James, are they entering?

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: There were 20 entries, no golds, and the majority of wines without medals. I am going to go to another class that turned out to be slightly controversial, and that will be JD's chance to answer, because you have done the panel a million times in a million years, and that is Sauvignon Blanc.

It is interesting that our two non-museum class golds were for wines that had oak as a part of them, and it is a feature we have seen over the last few years, so I would like you just to say what you think has been happening with Sauvignon Blanc.

Whether you think it is essential that oak is part of the deal, or just that we are not seeing the wines un-oaked that we should be.

JD PRETORIUS: Thank you, Michael. It was a little bit of a challenging class to begin with, predominantly 2024's hot vintage, and the great thing about this show is that we had 67 wines, and it was all we did for the day. Half of them were poured when we walked into the room, we broke, they reset, and the other half gets brought.

You can look, as Tom said, you can look at the wine, and you can see the ones that shine bright and the ones that shine green, that have a luminosity about them, and there were very few that had that. They were brown, they were yellow, and it is basic stuff.

Yes, it was a hot vintage, you might have higher PHs, but it is basic winemaking, and it was, that was the first step, a little concerning. It was the same in the Cabernets and the Bordeauxs, but specifically on the Sauvignon Blancs, what I find interesting, judging it with Tom, is we would score a wine down for being slightly herbal and having a higher acid, and here we go, why, it is Sauvignon Blanc, it is what it is supposed to be.

I wondered to what extent we as winemakers in the local industry have not fallen into the trap and tried to move away from the fact that it is super aromatic and acidic and light and lean, where in essence that is what it will always be, and that is what its DNA is. So again, great to have somebody with a vast experience internationally, but specifically from a winemaking technical point of view, so I think there is something we need to pay attention to from a production point of view.

Sauvignon Blanc is, where most varieties, I think you start with 0, and the more things you do right, you end up with a higher score out of 100. Sauvignon Blanc is the inverse. You start with 100, and the fewer things you do wrong, you end up with a higher score.

It is all about great fruit to begin with, and protecting it in the cellar, the majority obviously in an un-wooded class, obviously, whereas with a wooded class, I think people are approaching it with a Bordeaux white mindset, it is getting treated differently. It is generally speaking, those sites have been better defined; they know which ones work with oak, which ones have the capacity to handle oak.

They are generally much smaller, so they are more defined, more unique, and more kind of set out from the start, versus a blanket approach, a big volume of unwooded stuff. So yes, I think the wooded is a class stronger than the un-wooded, and it is growing, it is interesting.

I do not know what the commercial value is to that yet, but it is great that we have got the option. I do not think that it would be growing if it were not commercially viable, so that is great, showing that the variety can.

There is a wide range of styles, and there are great character differences in the white, but it is just to get them technically sound.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: You wanted to add something, Tamlyn?

TAMLYN CURRIN: Yes, just very quickly, because 10 days ago, tasting a whole day, I was tasting New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, and although I was not on the panel of Sauvignon Blanc here, tasting the trophies, I think that you guys are way ahead of New Zealand.

You have more elegance; there is just more nuance, there is more elegance, better balance. It is not just about big, shouty, brash fruit. We basically tasted about 100 Sauvignon Blancs, and every one tasted the same.

I think you have something potentially very exciting here. Again, so if there is focus on the vineyard and on stripping back to the purity of the fruit, but also your wooded Sauvignons have been done really nicely.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: That was very useful, thank you.

MICHEL BETTANE: All of these discussions, you are discussing varieties, but the 100% variety is not civilisation. To have a great Sauvignon, you need perhaps 5%, 10%, 15% of other things. It is like an actor, when you are a big, great actor, you need a lesser one just before you to show why you are so good.

It is very important to understand variety is not just on the style or place or light or micro climate, but also the origin of the variety. Sauvignon is a very special variety, the origin not very well known, because some people say Spain, and others as well, but in the blood.

Now that we have the genetics, we are beginning to understand what the beginning of the variety is, because we are able to trace the genetic elements. The Sauvignon and the winemaker have to understand the genetic elements. The Sauvignon is a category linked to Semillon and others, where the perfume is in the skins, and the perfume depends on the ripeness.

It can change, and the way that you understand that is that you crush the Sauvignon, not the way you have to crush a Chardonnay, which is completely different, and it is because of that you have so many differences in many places.

Some countries were very proud of their new style of Sauvignon, the juice around, because it was spectacular, these aromas, but these aromas define the ripeness because the weather, the light, is too hot.

It is very complex, the history, and I am very happy that now you are beginning to understand that the variety is linked to the place. You are not only one South African, but 20 South Africans, 40 South Africans, 100 South African wines that are different because of the place and because of the possibility to blend, and it shows in the Semillon, and the Sauvignon is really a blend that is really suited to many places in South Africa.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: Merci, Michel. We have Jacqueline who has been holding on patiently.

PARTICIPANT 5 (Jacqueline Lahoud): Just to extend on Sauvignon Blanc, I am very interested to know about the blends, the Sauv/Sem blend, even though commercially challenged, how did they fare? I usually really enjoy that. James?

JAMES PIETERSEN: There we go, got it. It is a small category; it is a strong category. I think traditionally in South Africa we have got the most kind of compelling white wines in that category, white wines that we know can last 8-10 years and plus, and again it performed really well, it got 2 golds out of a relatively small pool.

Again, I am going back to the whole thing; we need to make people understand Semillons. If there are any Semillons here, this is really a wine that works at the table. It is not really one of those wines that if a consumer buys it off the shelf and he sits on his porch and he looks at the sunset and just drinks a glass, it is not a drinking wine, it is a wine that works at the table.

And it has got a job to do, and we need to communicate that, and again, super strong category. I am glad we still make them, and we must make more of them because they are compelling, and we need to teach people to put them away.

I sat next to an Investec client last night, and she could not understand. She was blown away that we had this mature Kanonkop, a wine that is 7 years old, and she went, like, I did not know that white wines can become this old. And she was blown away, she loved the wine, it was her favourite wine of the evening. That is what needs to happen: everybody talking about Bordeaux wines.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: I am just going to add a stat to that one. In the Sauvignon Blanc un-wooded class, there were 40 entries and 4 wines that were silver or gold, so 10%. In the Sauvignon/Semillon blend class, 50% of the wines were silver or gold. Give us a microphone there, yes.

PARTICIPANT 11: It is a slight change of topic, but it is riffing off a comment that you made about cultivars, blends, and regions. There is a style which I am finding quite exciting, which is the emerging or emerged Swartland red blend, which is this mix of weird history that connects Portugal, Spain, and France, and I had just wondered if you have managed to taste some of those wines in that category? So, not.

Then, to the panel, is this class a distinct class that is worth exploring and talking about, or am I imagining it?

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: It is an emerging class; it is the first year. I am going to find who chaired the Rhône blend class. Tom, right, well, it got two golds.

TOM CARSON: We had so-called Rhône blends. The two golds, one was a 60-40 Syrah red and the other was a multi-variety, all-round blend, including Riesling, Viognier. So, to your question, I think that, and picking up what Michel is saying, is that we have to carry on experimenting and exploring in terms of what varieties go together.

And not be bound by the rest of the world. I always chuckle that SMV or SMG is a Rhône blend; they would never occur in the Rhône. The one conclusion to make is that very often those blends are whatever is left in the cellar, and you can see that. They need to be made with real intention.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: I am looking at a clock. Is there a hand up for a question? More questions in the room? John, can we get a microphone to you?

PARTICIPANT 12 (John Ford): Thank you. It is very complex because there are so many opinions right around the table. Michel was talking about evolution. I am lucky enough, or unlucky enough, to have been on this earth for quite a long time, and if I think back to the wines that I drank as a student in the 1960s, today I do not think any of them would be drinkable. But we are seeing a new generation of winemakers, and I am seeing exciting people in that, and I think one of the things that is going to make a difference, and the question is, how much difference has it made?

We are seeing more young winemakers going to other countries and working seasons in those places, and also going to the big shows, to Vinpro and Vinexpo and things like that, and being exposed to wines from all over the world. Does that have any real influence on what we are seeing?

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: I am going to pass the microphone to Tom, and the reason I am doing that is, over and above his own judging experience, which is extensive in Australia, he is also actively involved in the wine judge education via the Len Evans tutorial. And presumably, what you are seeing is a different generation of people coming through the wine industry, both at the judge level and the winemaker level, because of a much greater international vision. Would you talk about that?

TOM CARSON: It is a big question, but Australians have always loved to travel because we are an island down under the bottom of the world, and honestly, there are only 25 million of us now, in an area that is as big as the US, so it is a vast country with not a lot of things going on. And I know when I came out of winemaker

college, in 91, graduated 91, started working 92. My lovely wife, who is French, organised a vintage in Burgundy for me, so I went straight out of technical winemaking school and went straight into Burgundy, and it just blew my mind to be walking around villages that have been there for thousands of years and vineyards that have been there forever, and it was just incredible.

A lot of Australians have done that. A lot of Australian winemakers have travelled, and they have worked. You know, there was this big thing in the 90s, flying winemakers, most of them were Australians, going to Europe and working all over Europe and getting great experience in France, in Germany, Slovenia, Spain, Italy, and South Africa, and it had done amazing things for the winemaking fraternity.

You get to learn a different language of wine, and you get to taste. Like in Burgundy, they do not compare wines for being better or worse; they talk about the character of the place. Lavaux tastes like this because of the soil and the aspect and the vintage it went through, and Pommard, just a stone's throw away, is completely different because of this, that, and the other.

It is not that one is better or worse; it is just that they are different, and that is something the old world does very well: the language about wine, the respect for wine, the respect for the place that it is grown, and the work that it has done, whether it is a 1000-year-old bottle or a 20.

But in the education, the Len Evans tutorial was started by Len, a huge personality in Australian wine for many decades. Unfortunately, he is not with us any more, he passed away in 2006, but he was a very important judge in Australia, chaired many shows for many years, and he finally retired. He sort of looked around the room and said, "it is the same people here that were here 20 years ago. We have done something wrong here; we are not getting new judges through the system, and we are not getting a difference in opinion." It was an old boys club, knee rugs and pipes, and it was not much fun, all the same old big company winemakers. He started the Len Evans Tutorial, which was a way of identifying new talent, and it is an intensive week of tasting wine under wine show conditions, and then having master classes in the afternoon on anything from German Riesling to Burgundy to old Australian wine, to a complete week of immersion into international and Australian wine and finding the perspective there.

Throughout that week, there are only 12 scholars who attend. We have over 180 applications per year, and 12 lucky seats, and they are given an incredible experience. You can go have a look at the website, the Lenevanstutorial.com.

That was in 2001, that was the first year, and now it has been producing judges and has been for more than 20 years, that are given opportunities in the show. And as with the show here, there is a very strong rotation policy in the wine shows, well, the good wine shows. There are a lot of wine shows in Australia.

Not all of them are run perfectly. There are still some that are stuck with people who have been there for too long and will not get off the nest. I will not name the shows, but they are big shows, and they are not dynamic enough. The dynamic ones have young people. I chaired the Melbourne wine show 10 years ago; the previous chair was the first woman to chair the Melbourne wine show.

She is in her 30s, chairing the Melbourne wine show, and her perspective is different from that of the 50-year-old winemakers. She has an incredible palate and an incredible personality, and the respect that was in the room for her was immense, but that is an opportunity.

The room is full of winemakers and trade and Sommeliers and some press, and there is a great dynamic, and it is really good to see the results. Some of the best Australian wine shows are very modern; they are at the cutting edge of what winemaking is in Australia.

It can be done. Travel is super important, and I know, Tamlyn, you said a comment that people here do not drink widely enough, they need to drink more international wines, and I know the South African rand is not the strongest, and it is hard, and the cost of these wines is stupendous, some of the great wines in the world.

I have been part of many groups where we band together, we do an annual lunch, we spend all year finding these great wines, and then we split the cost over 8 or 10 people, and we drink these incredible wines, and we discuss them and have a fabulous lunch, so it can be done.

You do not have to do it every week, but exposure to those wines is critical to get perspective, to understand how special South African wine is, and not to sort of always compare yourself to something else or try to achieve something else. You have got to do it here for yourselves, you have to understand your terroir and make it happen, and have an international perspective and taste, it is super important.

MICHAEL FRIDJHON: I am really on the clock. I want it to wrap up. It is something that may seem immaterial, but actually has been something we have been focused on, and sadly, we have not seen progress, but it is possibly too soon.

Jancis (Robinson MW), and Tamlyn, who works with Jancis, are very focused on bottle weight, as indeed we should be. And the question really is, from the 2023 show onwards, we have been weighing the bottles, and we have looked to see whether there has been any real progress in terms of moving towards lightweight bottles.

It is too soon in a sense, in that a lot of wines that were at the show were bottled before this became as much of an issue as it is now. But it is worth noting that, using weights of 1200, 1.25 kilograms fluid in, so essentially 500 grams less, is lightweight, up to 1450, so 1250 till 1450 is kind of mid-weight, and over 1450, so 700 grams and more just the bottle.

In 2025 versus 24, so in 24 we had nearly 15% in lightweight. This year, only 12%. In the heavyweight category, in 24 it was 26.6%, this year it is 29%, so the really bothersome statistic is we are not seeing more lightweight glass, and for what it is worth, in this sample, we are seeing more heavyweight glass.

The middle band is almost identical at 58% for both years, so I think there is a message there. We know that the opportunity to get very elegant, lightweight, or lighter-weight glass is now available. We have seen some really quite showy bottles that are definitely under that kind of 700 gram.

We did have a wine, and I am not sure if it is the heaviest wine at the show, but there was a bottle over a kilogram, and I do not think that there is a necessity, and I think that when you use the bottle to work for you, there is a lack of confidence in what is inside of it.

I would like to see that, over time, the industry plucks up enough courage to let the wine speak for itself. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for being here. I am putting a call to this because we are round about 25 minutes over time.

No questions were wasted, and I just want to say that it has been the most extraordinary group of judges to work with. They have been fabulous to work with, the dynamic of the panels was everything, and the joy of just meeting and chatting afterwards is a privilege which I really appreciate. Thank you all very much.

Ends