

A NEW ERA

Last September's New Wave South Africa tasting in London was a defining moment for these winemakers. Organised by importers Swig, Indigo, Dreyfus Ashby, New Generation Wines and FMV, the tasting spoke of the "camaraderie, talent, youth and openness" pervading much of the South African wine scene.

To those at the tasting it was palpable. Jancis Robinson MW said the collection "really did confirm the existence of a whole new era in a country's wine history". Jamie Goode eulogised: "In a decade's time we'll look back and say 'I was there'. For this is when South African fine wine came of age".

The new generation had arrived. Not only are they themselves hungry to succeed, the industry wants them to succeed. And the consumer, having got a taste for the quality and value of the wines they produce, also wants them to succeed. They are the beginnings of the fulfilment of the post-apartheid promise of a wine industry built not on volume, but on quality and diversity unlike anywhere else in the world.

'These new winemakers share information and work together in a way that benefits not only themselves, but the whole industry. They have a generosity of spirit that has its own momentum'

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

"I think these winemakers were really lucky to be exactly at the right place at the right time." So says the crusading viticulturist who has helped a good number of them on their way, Rosa Kruger.

Kruger's expert knowledge of South Africa's old vines – Chenin Blanc, Cinsault, Grenache, Sémillon, Palomino, Clairette and Tinta Barocca among others – has been instrumental in setting many of these wandering winemakers on their way.

Following Eben Sadie's extraordinary success in the Swartland, they "saw the opportunity and ran with it". Crucially, though, they did so in a co-operative way.

"These new winemakers share information on vines and wines," Kruger says, "and work together in a way that benefits not only themselves, but the whole industry. They have a generosity of spirit that has its own momentum."

As someone with an abiding passion for promoting South Africa's viticultural potential, Kruger has been only too happy to point these winemakers in the right direction. As well as giving them tip-offs about premium old-vine sites, she is managing a long-term project to catalogue all vines over 35 years of age in South Africa.

The catalogue, funded by the billionaire owner of Cartier and scion of the Antonij Rupert estate in Franschoek, Johan Rupert, is one serious piece of intellectual property – and one that's freely available to view on the internet at iamold.co.za.

The logic of this project is clear: the more people know about these vines, the more likely they are to survive. It is a prime example of different sections of the South African wine industry pulling in the same direction – and it's all geared towards promoting the country's image based on quality and diversity.

Further evidence of this collective momentum comes from industry body VinPro. Rico Basson, VinPro's MD, makes it clear that the achievements of the 'little guys' are not going unnoticed. "The new wave of winemakers is certainly a very exciting prospect and that spirit of openness is not only encouraging to the wider industry, but sets an example to more established businesses.

"It would be a big mistake not to harness the remarkable energy of the dynamic next wave of winemakers."

VinPro is working on a 'strategic roadmap' project called the Wine Industry Strategic Exercise (WISE), with a wealth of activity around innovation, leadership, marketing and creativity that aims to help the country's wine industry flourish and prosper.

"We know the next generation will need to be both implementers and enablers in this strategic roadmap," Basson says, adding that a number of 'new wave' winemakers were consulted during the development phase of the project and will "definitely be involved with implementation".

Feature findings

- > South Africa is in the process of changing its winemaking image from one based on quantity to one based on quality and diversity.
- > The unlikely orchestrators of this transformation are a 'new wave' of young winemakers who are making outstanding terroir-driven wines despite not owning vineyards or, in many cases, winery facilities.
- > An important factor in the success of these winemakers is their spirit of co-operation and the support they receive from important industry figures like viticulturist Rosa Kruger.
- > Vital to the success of their working model is their relationship with the farmers. Many of the new wave are clubbing together to secure larger sites and offer a higher price for grapes.
- > New plantings and smart viticulture will be important if the drive towards quality and diversity is to be sustained.

COLLECTIVE SPIRIT

South Africa's old-vine heritage will be an important factor here, and it's these winemakers without their own vineyards who are vital to the survival of these vines. The bigger players aren't interested because they are in such small parcels and are planted so disparately. It's the little guys who are focusing on quality, who have their ears to the ground and have the right contacts, who make the difference.

"One of our primary resources is our network of younger players," says John Seccombe of Thorne and Daughters. Perfectly illustrating the co-operative approach, he spoke to *the drinks business* during harvest, having just picked a block on the Botelleray Hills of Stellenbosch along with Mick and Jeanine Craven of Craven Wines, Alex Milner from Natte Velleij, and Chris and Suzaan Alheit of Alheit Vineyards; makers of white blend Cartology – one of the most talked-about South African wines since Sadie's Columella.

"The idea has been to form a bit of a syndicate and say, well, each of us in our own right couldn't take all the fruit from the >



Pieter Walser, Blank Bottle

block; if we form a bit of a syndicate on it we can pay decent prices and account for all the tonnage on the block, so it starts to make at more sense for the farmers and it allows us to compete with much bigger concerns.

“We’ve established 60 tonnes as a kind of benchmark for remaining a small, hands-on business while still giving us buying power in the grape market, which is important from getting that continuity in the contract.”

Continuing the sharing spirit, Seccombe works from the winery of Gabrielskloof, where Peter-Allen Finlayson – who makes his own stunning Burgundian-style Pinot Noir and Chardonnay under the Crystallum label – is head winemaker. Marelise Niemann, producing her highly regarded Momento old-vine Chenin and Grenache, is also there, as is Alsatian winemaker Julien Schaal.

Finlayson worked in another rented facility at Hemelrand Farm in Hermanus

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TRADE TALK: How important is diversity to the future of the South African wine industry and do you think that people in the industry are pulling in the same direction?



ROSA KRUGER, VITICULTURIST

“Working together is always crucial for all levels of the wine industry. In my humble opinion, this is what lacked in the South African wine industry in the past. There were a few huge players that worked for their own interests only. There is presently an eagerness on all levels to pull together to build Brand South Africa and make it work. The big industry players like WOSA, VinPro, Sawis, the Department of Viticulture and Oenology at the University of Stellenbosch and Winetech under Gerard Martin are talking on different levels to the big brands, but also to small wine producers in an attempt to bridge the gap.

“The biggest advantage and most attractive feature of the South African landscape is its diversity. We have Sauvignon Blanc in sandy soils on the coast at low altitude, Pinot Noir planted at 900m altitude in the mountains, Syrah on slate in Kasteelberg in Swartland, Chardonnay in Elgin, Chenin bush vines in granite in Paardeberg and 116-year-old Sémillon on an old riverbed in Franschhoek. The challenge in future is to optimise this diversity and plant the right clones and varieties in the right sites.”



ERNST GOUWS, NATIONAL SALES MANAGER, ERNST GOUWS & CO

“Diversity plays a vital role for the health of the South African wine industry on a number of levels, all relating to the basic principle of quality over quantity. The positive effects that this focus has on our industry can be seen from as far up in the production chain as marketing and as far down as job creation, from using labour that involves hands, not electronics. After 40 years of working successfully by sourcing grapes rather than owning vineyards, the Gouws family knows what’s important to our colleagues and clientele: over-delivery in the quality of our service, wine and packaging, rather than being growth or bottom-line driven.

“We’re all pulling towards individuality and, as a result, the diversity of the South African portfolio is growing. I see genuine support within the industry among producers on a number of levels, with a general consensus that what we’re doing is not only in our own best interest, but also in that of the group.”

with Chris Alheit for four years. John Seccombe was also there.

“We saw at Hemelrand just how successful it is when you can work together as a group of producers and share knowledge and share experience,” Finlayson says.

“It was quite important for me that I could bring over my friends and lease space. If one can communicate and plan ahead together than it can work really well.”

“A lot of us share cellars that we rent,” adds Jocelyn Hogan of Hogan Wines – another producer in this network, who makes an old-vine Chenin Blanc and, unusually, a red blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan and Cinsault.

A former winemaking partner of Walser at

Stellenbosch University, she benefited from some of the insider knowledge on grape sources passed down from Alheit and Finlayson. She shares a winery with the highly regarded Donovan Rall at Zorgvliet in Stellenbosch.

“There’s full-on openness all the time and that’s a key thing, where we all learn from each other and are open to experimentation and failure,” Hogan says.

“Why would these wineries take us onboard? Aren’t we a hassle? Maybe, but the industry is under strain. It’s a hell of a tough industry. So having guys filling 100 barrels in a 1,000-barrel cellar, all paying you so much per tonne and storage fees, it helps with cashflow. Everyone feeds off each other and helps each other.”

REWARDING THE FARMERS

Finlayson sees clearly that the key to the sustainability of the micronegociant model is to reward the farmers. Without that relationship with the farmers, it collapses.

“All of us, in having a philosophy of minimal intervention and making authentic wines, we need really, really good fruit, otherwise it’s just not going to work. The most difficult thing is finding that great fruit and then hanging on to it,” he explains.

“Farmers are the ones who are not being rewarded for high-priced wines, and I think it’s very important that the growers are rewarded if they are producing great fruit.”

“That’s our challenge in South Africa,” agrees Walser. “How do you get the farmer to keep on making a living, because if the farmer pulls out his vines and plants something else, we’re going to all lose a lot.

“Our job is to make sure the farmer makes money. As small guys, we don’t have the volume to change everything, but it’s a concept that you’re trying to create, you’re

paying a bit more for your little tonne, and that trickles through and changes a lot in the industry so everyone can start paying a little bit more – if you get a premium for your wines, obviously.

So it is that a trend is developing for these winemakers to formalise their relationships with farmers, offering generous prices and often paying as a group in order to secure larger parcels for longer term use.

“A lot of us are moving towards paying a per-hectare rate on the vineyards, which effectively takes away the risk from the grower and allows them to make some profit,” explains Seccombe.

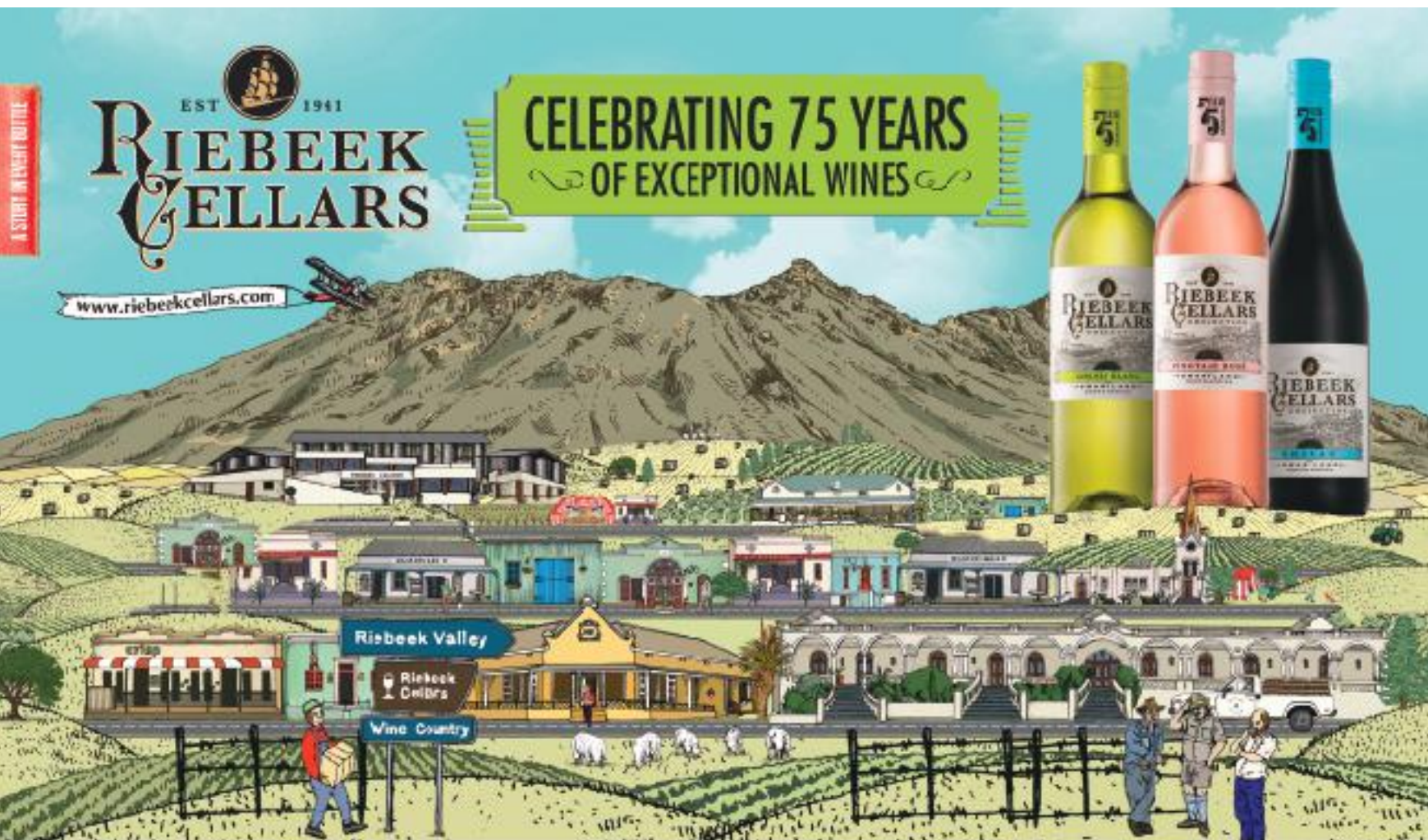
“Hopefully in return we are producing wines that fetch the prices that justify that investment in the vineyards and saving all these blocks.”

NEW PLANTING

That sort of cohesive, forward-thinking will be a test point for the sustainability of South Africa’s ‘new wave’; it’s not just a matter of

Winemakers at the New Wave South Africa tasting

The New Wave South Africa tasting took place on 24 September 2015 at the Vinyl Factory in London’s Soho. Winemakers in attendance were: Adam Mason; Adi Badenhorst; Alex Starey; Carl van der Merwe; Chris and Suzaan Alheit; Chris Mullineux; Chris Williams; Craig Wessels; David Sadie; Donovan Rall; Duncan Savage; Ginny Povall; Hagen Viljoen; Hannes Storm; Jeanine and Mick Craven; Jessica Garlick; Rudiger Gretschel; Johan Meyer; John Seccombe; Julien Schaal; Louis Boutinot; Marc Kent; Marelise Niemann; Peter-Allan Finlayson; Pieter Karstens; Pieter Walser; Rebecca Tanner; Paul Nicholls; Sam O’Keefe; Sebastian Beaumont; Stuart Downes; Thinus Kruger and Rick ‘The Cape Crusader’.



south africa



Peter-Allan Finlayson, Crystallum

securing sites that are already planted, but of planting vines anew.

"These producers will have to become more creative about their grape sources and what they are doing," warns Robin Davis of online merchant Swig, which imports some of Walser's Blank Bottle range as well as several other of South Africa's 'new wave' winemaking talent.

"A lot of them are trying to get stuff from the same sources and that's going to become an issue. It wasn't so much for the last three or four years, but I can see as more producers think 'hey, this is a good route to have my own business and my own brand', they are all trying to make Chenin Blanc from Skurfberg or Cinsault from Piekenierskloof... But they're having to think outside the box, and that's refreshing."

When it comes to new planting, however, Kruger is already ahead of the curve. Over the past seven years, together with a research team, she has introduced 25 new varieties she believes will thrive in South Africa's climate and soils, which are now being propagated in nurseries.

As well as the Grenache and white blends favoured by the likes of Alheit, Seccombe,

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BRUCE JACK, CHIEF WINEMAKER, FLAGSTONE

"The South African winemaking landscape is probably the most dynamic in the world at the moment. We are not just seeing a proliferation of new wine operations, but also new, boundary-pushing, divergent styles, new vineyard areas and new debates. This bustling, energy-infused environment is wonderful to be part of.

"The diversity of opinions is part of the South African national character. There's an old Afrikaans saying which, roughly translated, means: 'Sheep are for farming with, not following'. This strong individualistic self-determinism is what we expect from each other. We revel in the fact that our winemakers are all striking out into the wilderness on their own adventurous journeys, bound by only a few obvious commonalities – primarily an obsession with making evermore characterful, authentic wine."



RICO BASSON, MANAGING DIRECTOR, VINPRO

"Diversity is a key factor within the South African wine industry. Not only do we have more than 90 different cultivars planted on around 100,000ha in regions stretching across the Western and Northern Cape, and 140,000 hectares of indigenous habitat restored as part of our Biodiversity and Wine project, but we also have people diversity as a significant asset – more than 800 winemakers across age, race and gender, 3,300 producers, 35,000 farm and winery workers with total employment of 290,000.

The Wine Industry Strategic Exercise process has over the past two years enabled us to make significant progress to improve alignment between key stakeholders and different platforms – eg, cultivar associations and business units, including a wine value chain roundtable with national government and labour where key themes are positioned.

Niemann, Hogan and Rall – which she believes will have a major impact on South Africa's reputation in the coming year or two – she has also brought in varieties like Roussanne, Marsanne, Macabeo, Mencía from Ribeira Sacra ("I think it might work on the mountains here"), Grenache Perluda from Calce in Roussillon, and even Assyrtiko from Greece.

Kruger says the important thing is to plant intelligently to safeguard quality.

"We are all working towards better quality already," she says. "But one crucial thing still needs to happen: better viticulture. We have all these great winemakers, but we need to get money to the farmer to plant clean material, the right variety on the right rootstock at the right altitude and at the right density. We need to cultivate a new culture of quality viticulture. Some of South Africa's best sites haven't been planted."

A TURNING SHIP

Slowly but surely the South African wine industry is turning its reputation around. There are challenges ahead – as well as the sustainability issues, the weak rand may begin to put pressure on producers over the next year or two – but the signs are positive.

Wines of South Africa CEO Siobhan Thompson points out that consumers are trading up, with value performing better than volume in 2015, "suggesting that our wines are being sold at higher prices".

With the likes of Rosa Kruger providing a blueprint for South Africa's viticultural future, if the 'little guys' can continue to work in the same spirit – overdelivering on quality and price, and presenting a unified front to push South Africa's diversity of terroir and grape varieties – the country's potential as one of the world's great wine lands may very well be fulfilled.

You can almost see Walser rubbing his hands together. *db*