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The 2017 Nederburg Wine Auction on Saturday September 17 offers an array of great wines to bidders, in a revised format auction event.

A trend started around 2006 - as far back as available statistics go on the Nederburg website - of an increasing number of lots remaining unsold each year, which peaked in 2009 at 17.33% (10% in 2008).

I started tracking the auction when I first attended the event in 2012, and the auction team under stewardship of Dalene Steyn had already expended a great deal of effort trying to address the issues that had contributed to the increase in unsold lots.

In 2010, 6.56% of lots were unsold, and in 2011, it was whittled down to zero lots unsold, but in 2012, it spiked back up to 9.43% of lots unsold.

To say that the atmosphere during the post-auction press briefing was sombre, would be an understatement, because if all lots had been sold in 2012, it would theoretically have taken the auction total sales up to just 4% less than the previous year in relation to number of litres sold.

It was clear that some drastic action had to be

taken if the tide was to be properly turned.

I clearly recall a lunch at Nederburg's newly opened Red Table Restaurant in December that year, during which then cellar master Razvan Macici, winemaker Wilhelm Pienaar, Distell head of wine business Carina Gouws and auction head Dalene Steyn walked past our table to sit down for lunch, and tarried a while to chat.

"What are you four up to?" I enquired. "We've been strategising for next year's auction," responded Dalene, making it clear that change was in the air.

Speculating about what that change might entail and thinking back to the 2012 auction, I did recall on a good number of occasions as new lots popped up on the screen in the auction venue thinking to myself: "what the hell is that doing here?"

A bit of history to explain the question. The Nederburg Auction started 43 years ago, to market only Nederburg's fine and rare wines. It was only much later that it was thrown open to the rest of the industry, and it became a showcase for the best that South Africa has to offer.

That upwards of 40% of sales typically go to foreign markets, is an indication of the role the auction plays in showcasing the best of the best, and more importantly, upping the price per litre ante, here and overseas.

But the emphasis on fine and rare had drifted somewhat, which is why, in my view, the 2012 auction happened the way it did. Those "what the hell is that doing here?" lots had inevitably contributed to the decline.

But that is now a thing of the past, and the work started after the 2012 auction by Dalene and her team has borne fruit.

In 2013, unsold lots were a mere 1.21% off a dramatically reduced total volume of sales - around half of 2012 - with total sales of R4 358 460, a shade under 2012 total sales of R4 701 420.

But it is the average rands per litre for the subsequent auctions that tell the real story, for since a low of R440/litre in 2013, the price has steadily trended upward with a leap to

R700/litre in 2014, R620/litre in 2015, and R760/litre last year. Volumes down, unsold lots zero, and quality up after 2014.

I attended the annual pre-auction tasting last week, and what a pleasure it was to sample the exceptional line-up of wines that will go under the hammer on Saturday September 17.

Inevitably, one encounters wines that are stylistically such, that one finds them less than attractive, but that is a matter of palate preference, rather than a technical fault in the wine, and they were few and far between.

One hundred and twenty seven items in 626 lots will go under the hammer of David Elswood, Christie's of London's international head of wine, and it will be fascinating to see how the prices achieved play out in the now one-day auction, with a tasting for registered buyers at the venue the day before, commencing at 3pm.

But if what I tasted last week is anything to go by - a honey-laden fresh and crisp Pongracz Desiderius 2003; a wonderfully clean and sumptuous Romond Rebus Cabernet Franc 2010 laden with plush black fruit and tobacco; a thatchy-nosed Fleur du Cap Unfiltered Viognier Limited Release 2014 laden with sweet, clean fruit; and a rich-palated mineral-infused DeMorgenzon Maestro White 2012, to name a small sample - bidders at this year's event are in for a real treat.

It is abundantly clear that Dalene and her team have done the hard yards, and it is equally clear that it has paid off.

See you at Nederburg on Saturday September 17.