

From the gracious heights of our fine wine industry to the badlands of the poor and starving

- Michael Fridjhon



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13 Reactions

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Not everyone who participates in the world of Cape wine is a recreational consumer of the fruits of our vineyards: there are other consumers, living in communities where hope for better life has long ago faded into the gloom of despair, and where alcohol – cheap wine, and cheaper so-called ales – as well as tik and nyaope are used to block out the vista of desperation extending endlessly into the future. If the industry wishes to transform this labour from a burden borne with resentment to a career of choice, it must come with skills development and the prospect of skilled labour rates and job satisfaction.

In June 2005 the proprietors of the estates which were rated and ranked in the famous 1855 classification of Bordeaux gathered to celebrate 150th anniversary of its publication. I was fortunate enough to be invited to the party, which was hosted at Chateau d'Yquem. This was not a modest gathering: the Bordeaux Cru Classe estates were in the midst of a seemingly endless boom, with a string of decent vintages going back a decade, and nature delivering wines of legend just when they were required for the millennium. Primeur prices for these vinous treasures – which, by the way, represent only a tiny fraction of the region's production – had increased roughly five fold since the mid 1990s. For much the same effort, and with assets which had long been amortised, revenues were sky-rocketing as a result of what seemed an insatiable international demand. The Global Financial Crisis lay hidden in the mists of an unimagined future several years ahead.

Four Three Star Michelin chefs had set up their restaurants at d'Yquem, so that instead of banquet fare, usually not so bad when a decent French *traiteur* gets called in, the very best of French fine dining would be available for the guests. As we were standing around at twilight, sipping on a full array of wines from the 1855 estates, and making the kind of small talk which precedes a dinner whose joys were easy to anticipate, one of my hosts – the proprietor of a venerable and much celebrated property – said, slightly apologetically “you must excuse the slightly muted celebrations, but down there (this with a airy wave from the heights of the d'Yquem plateau to the lower lying ground which is home to the more generic Bordeaux vineyards), down there, people are starving”.

He explained that although we were standing on the high ground of Sauternes, some very ordinary Bordeaux appellations were located near. The very survival of many of these small growers had become increasingly precarious as the average price paid for their wine remained much the same as it had been ten years previously, whereas their input cost inflation was running at 2-3% annually. “They are under-recovering on their running costs, and because they are small business proprietors, they cannot really claim on the welfare state: they really are starving,” I said. “We are really not in the same wine business, though we farm in much the same place. The world sees the opulence of the 1855 estates, it is wealth in the midst of poverty.”

Arguably these same structural issues afflict the South African wine industry, where an estimated 60%+ of all producers are marginal or lose money. However, there are, believe it or not, other more pressing discrepancies which everyone connected in any way to the industry needs to address. Producers are – or should be - acutely aware of the high Gini coefficient which is an embarrassing economic truth of our post apartheid society. Not everyone who participates in the world of Cape wine is a recreational consumer of the fruits of our vineyards: there are other consumers, living in communities where hope for a better life has long ago faded into the gloom of despair, and where alcohol – cheap wine, and cheaper so-called ales – as well as tik and nyaope are used to block out the vista of desperation extending endlessly into the future. Part of this concept of “two wine industries” is in fact two types of consumers: if producers don't acknowledge them, and act to do something about the conditions which drive them deeper into the pit of desolation, they will not be in a position to deal with the prohibitionism which colours so much of the national government's rhetoric about alcohol. For reasons of political convenience, or perhaps out of ignorance, our politicians see alcohol as a cause of socially dysfunctional communities, rather than as a consequence of them.

When it comes to lobbying the government, the wine industry enthusiastically reminds the authorities that it is one of the top drivers of the Western Cape economy. It supports this assertion by producing statistics which suggest that 280,000 jobs are directly or indirectly the result of grape-farming, wine making, packaging, transport – the trade in alcohol. It shows that the industry adds 1.2 % to GDP and pays in excess of a billion to the fiscus – which is more than the combined net income of the producers. In addition there is the contribution the mere presence of the wine industry makes towards tourism, not only the annual descent of Gauteng on the Western Cape, but, perhaps more importantly, the hard currency contribution of Northern Hemisphere visitors – the so-called swallows as well as the once-in-a-lifetime adventurers. The industry seeks to impress on an otherwise disinterested or incompetent national government the vital role it plays, endeavouring to show the size of its contribution, and therefore its indispensability. It should therefore assume a responsibility equal to its claims, and play its part in the upliftment of communities whose despair, despondence and general sense of helplessness makes them easy prey to drug pushers, ale-vendo and the merchants of oblivion for those whose everyday lives demand an urgent avenue of escape. ◊

How, you may ask, is it to do this, when many are already battling to stay viable as grape prices remain resolutely low, and the on-shelf price of packaged wine leaves no margin for the value chain. Here it can turn for inspiration to someone whose credentials in terms of commitment to the industry, and to the country, are beyond dispute. Rosa Kruger is a viticulturist, and one of the key drivers behind the Old Vine Project, which has identified the blocks of old vines whose potential to yield world class wines has been widely acknowledged as a game-changer for the ultra-premium segment of the wine industry. Rosa is – almost single handedly and against the inertia of some of the key institutions in the industry – trying (so far unsuccessfully) to get training programmes for vineyard workers included in the certification criteria for the Integrated Production of Wine regulations. In her own words: ◊

“I work in the field. I see the needs every day. I honestly think the general farm worker needs and wants to develop his skills as a vineyard worker. I have done it myself on a very very small scale and I have seen the wonderful results.

“Empowerment starts with education. Social upliftment starts with education. I really believe that.

“I have lost too many vineyard workers to Tik, TB and violence, to not notice the absolute desperation. I think by education we can start the long and cumbersome process of upliftment.”

Vineyard work for those who spend long hours in the sometimes baking sun is not a choice: in many of the inland areas, it is the only option other than unemployment and starvation. If the industry wishes to transform this labour from a burden borne with resentment to a career of choice, it must come with skills development and the prospect of skilled labour rates and job satisfaction. ◊

Chris Mullineux, who together with his wife and partner Andrea, has turned their Mullineux & Leeu operation into what is probably the smartest and most successful small- to mid-size wine business which has developed anywhere in the world in the past decade, trained as an accountant – but having qualified, instead he chose to spend his days walking between rows of vines, watching, suckering, pruning, nurturing. Because he knows what he is doing, and because he understands the science of the vine and the art of fine wine, he loves performing exactly the same work which those who are forced into agricultural employment resent and despise. If the industry doesn't empower the labour upon whom it depends – and empower them with knowledge, and passion and a sense of their place in the greater machine out of which fine wine emerges, it will always have these two halves of the industry separated by an unbridgeable chasm.

In addition to these two component parts to the wine industry – and which require urgent attention if they are not to break down - there are another two halves which function in a competitive yet symbiotic relationship. These are the worlds of commercial or, as some would have it industrial wine, and the worlds of fine, some might call it craft wine, others, *vin de terroir* – wines made to express origin more than the hand of the winemaker. It's become fashionable to see these two wine industries as hermetically sealed off from each other, fighting each other for the same share of the consumer Rand. The “terroirists” appear to have acquired a position of superiority, as if the expression of origin (assuming this is always discernible) necessarily trumps the art of “made” wine. If the participants of both of these segments choose to fight amongst themselves, to factionalise themselves rather than stand united, they will continue to be easy prey for other – real – competitors chasing the disposable income of their customers.

These two wine industries are really one and the same, and although wines with a claim to origin tend to fetch higher prices, the success of Australia's Penfolds Grange and Dom Perignon – for example – shows that there is a demand for ultra-premium wines which make no claim about terroir. South African producers need to understand that for wine – as a category – to grow, it must have an affordable entry point which brings new consumers into its wonderful and sometimes overly mysterious world. But it also needs to be able to maintain the interest of those who have made the first leap of faith. Entry level wine must be consistent and it must be affordable – and it must also be susceptible to stylistic modification, because at this point fashion is a key element in creating the essential interest which makes category change possible. The fruit for these wines must be farmed on an industrial scale, and the wines made using all the legal technology available to optimise the consumer experience. There is no future for the craft wine industry if the commercial or industrial side of the business doesn't do its job properly. However, once consumers discover the joy of wine, the opportunity presented by the infinite nuance of place and craft will create an endless playground: there will be no way out of the maze because there will be no desire to leave.

The Nederburg Auction is a celebration of the extraordinary variety which nature, through the diversity of the countless growing sites, and through the skill and knowledge of the winemaker, has brought to Cape wine. There are wines on sale made from fruit harvested from vineyards planted before the World War II; wines made by craftsmen who have been dead for many decades; wines produced by the latest generation of wine-savvy artisans, youngsters who were born years after the first Nederburg Auction was held a mere 42 years ago. Every one of these bottles was made with the potential to evolve, to become what it is now, and what it may yet become in the years which lie ahead. They would not be here if there were not two parts to the wine industry, the affordable everyday beverages that bring consumers to the world of wine and which provide the funding not only for events such as this auction, but for the craftsmen whose investment in skill, time and money would not have been possible if there wasn't a cash cow somewhere in the background.

If the wine industry is to survive and to thrive its members need to be conscious of its fracture points and to strive to bridge the gaps that have appeared in its edifice. Producers cannot ignore the plight of the communities living in their midst whose circumstances turn them into indentured labourers: by giving them the knowledge to become more active players in the value chain they will obtain the sense of purpose necessary to escape the evils of addiction, and they in turn will give the industry the skills it needs to raise the overall quality of what it produces. Those who process grapes cannot ignore the polarisation around production sites: they need to ensure that growers in appellation with the potential to yield wines which express their origin are suitably remunerated, and that those in places where high volumes of healthy fruit can be obtained have the skills and opportunities to make the most of their crop. Finally the industry needs a culture of mutual respect across the great and artificial divide which appears to separate fine wine from the good everyday drink which lies at the heart of every wine country. There are enough enemies beyond the city walls that there is no need to create fake rivalries within.

It is a great privilege to have access to fine wine: while its consumers choose to see this as a reward for their own successes in the material world, it comes with obligations: to respect those out of whose labour, insight and intellect the quality emerged, to appreciate their achievement, and, by their actions, to ensure the continuity and sustainability of the enterprise of fine wine in South Africa. **DM**

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