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Decanter’s globetrotting consultant editor gives us a round-up of recent tastings, his views on current issues in the wine world and top bottles to drink or keep

Judging in the Cape

Over three days in early May I was in Paarl as one of the three international judges of South Africa’s 14th Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show. The six South African judges were either top winemakers or educators, accompanied by a different associate judge each day to make up three panels of four judges.

Since the start, the Old Mutual show has been chaired by the country’s leading wine authority Michael Fridjhon, the whole event co-ordinated by his wife Janice. The Old Mutual, a national and international financial services group, sees great value in a process that identifies South Africa’s top wines and takes the gold medal and trophy winners on a national road show, presenting them to 3,000 wine enthusiasts in eight cities across the country.

Such is the rigour of judging and reputation of the results, the show attracts the best wines from top producers. This year, despite the tough trading environment for South Africa’s wineries, 224 producers took part and 1,082 wines (42 more than in 2014) were entered. Shiraz was the largest category with 120 wines, followed by 108 Sauvignon Blancs, 98 Chardonnays, 91 Cabernet Sauvignons, 89 Bordeaux blends, 74 Chenin Blans, 65 Pinotages, 48 Merlots, 35 Pinot Noirs and 46 Méthode Cap Classiques.

On the first morning my panel saw a range of Semillon-Sauvignons of high quality, more than a dozen single-varietals from Albariño to Zinfandel and some marvellous late-harvest whites. The competition also has a Museum Class, for wines at least four years old for the whites, and eight years for the reds, which represented 5% of the total entry this year, as in 2014.

The wines, 120 on the first two days, less on the third, are pre-poured, the panels delivering a consensus-driven result to Michael Fridjhon who will be called in (as I or Gerard Basset are at the Decanter World Wine Awards) in case of any disagreement.

I admire greatly Fridjhon’s judging philosophy, which he sums up in a simple mnemonic: PAPERCLIPS. This stands for Purity, Aesthetic integrity, Potential, Equilibrium, Refinement, Complexity, Luminosity, Intricacy, Persistence, Savouriness. And he states: “Wines which manifest these features are hardly ever the result of pure chance. Like all other “created” works of art, they are artefacts of intention.”

Winemakers talk of how they are merely the midwives of terroir, but every decision they take moves inexorably towards the end result.”

Judging wine, he adds, is not about a fixed ranking, but: “more an approval rating that quantifies how successfully the winemaker achieved what he set out to do.” Although it is my view that in most fine wines the terroir and/or the variety should dominate, it is true that the winemaker is there at the start.

The afternoon before the judging started, there was a tasting of 11 Old Whites from 1999 to 1973 and 21 Old Reds from 1986 to 1965 (see ‘From the Cellar’, right) with some famous names of course, but also several unknown to me. From the 18 trophy winners listed below, seven were a new discovery. In Decanter’s November 2014 issue, I wrote in these pages about two seminal tastings that had reminded me of the

Steven recommends... (for full details of UK stockists, see p91)

Domaine du Haut Bourg, Muscadet Côtes de Grandlieu sur Lie, Loire, France 2005
17.5/20 (91/100)
£14–£18 Dorset Wine Co, Solent Cellar, Sommelier’s Choice From a single vineyard of 70-year-old vines, aged on lees in underground tanks for 10 years. Drink 2015-2018. Ale 12.5%.

Bachelet, Wismer Vineyard Chardonnay, Niagara, Ontario, Canada 2011
18 (93)
£46.99 Liberty Wines, The Old Bridge Wine Shop
This and Bachelet’s Saunders Chardonnay stood out at a recent tasting, both of grand cru quality. Drink 2016-2021. Ale 13%.
For more on Canada, see p50

Christian Moueix, St-Emilion, Bordeaux, France 2012
16.75 (89)
£14 Marks & Spencer
From a mix of sandy, clay and limestone soils across the appellation, with 15% Cabernet Franc adding fragrance to the Merlot fruit. A very good St-Emilion from an underrated year. Drink 2015-2020. Ale 13.5%.
creative quality from South Africa, and this short visit confirmed it once more.

The results

It is also worth listing the remaining Gold Medal winners: Elkendal, Cabernet Sauvignon 2012; Flagstone, Dark Horse Shiraz 2011; Iona, Chardonnay 2014; La Motte, Pierneef Collection Syrah-Viognier 2013; Nederburg, Private Bin, Eminence 2012; Perdeberg, The Dry Land Collection, Barrel-Fermented Chenin Blanc 2013; Rare Earth Vineyards, Unwooded Sauvignon Blanc 2013; Saxenburg, Private Collection Shiraz 2012; Stellenrust, Barrel Fermented Chardonnay 2013; Wildkraans, Chenin Blanc Barrel-Select Reserve 2013.

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From the cellar
Old South African wines
Of 11 whites from 1999 to 1973, three stood out: Bouchard Finlayson, Kaaimansgat Chardonnay 1997, still lemony-fresh; a herby, complex Buitenverwachting Sauvignon Blanc 1994, and a vigorous, Vouvray-like Zonnebloem, Stein 1979. The reds, from 1966 to 1965, were full of successes: a ripe, savoury, Burgundian-like Rozendal Farm, Cabernet Sauvignon 1963 from 60-year-old vines; a warm Châteauneuf-like Alto, Rouge 1973. The Zonnebloem, Cabernet 1970, still ripe and fresher than a Médoc from the same year; Zonnebloem, Cabernet 1969, slightly burnt but with lots of vigour, clarity and depth; Alto, Selected Cabernet 1965: the winery’s first vintage; and a Zonnebloem, Cabernet 1965, slightly Porty but with fragrance and depth. Basic fermenting tanks, old oak and haphazard bottling meant that these wines really were made in the vineyard. Until 1973 there were no minimum percentages for whatever varietal name appeared on the label; the requirement is now 85%.

For the cellar
Château La Fleur Morange
This 3.8ha vineyard in St-Pey d’Arrens boasts the oldest vines in St-Emilion, planted in 1902. The soil is a complex mix of chalky limestone and sandy clay over an iron oxide subsoil known as crasse de fer. While the balance in the vineyard is 70% Merlot, 30% Cabernet Franc, the grand vin is generally even, for there is a second wine, named Mathilde after the owners’ daughter, made from 100% 75-year-old Merlot. La Fleur Morange — promoted to grand cru classé in the 2012 reclassification — shows the very low yields and paragiste cellar work (of which I usually disapprove), so the 2010 (£55) has lots of grip and depth, the 2009 (£55) is richer but still tannic, 2008 (£49) elegant and fresh with fine crunchy fruit, 2007 (£49) rich and smooth for the vintage, 2006 (£46) spicy with both lift and depth, 2005 (£75) still tight with fine freshness for the future, and even the 2004 (£45) showing solid florals. Mathilde 2011 (£20) has good length for this light vintage, 2010 (£20) is bigger and richer, while 2009 (£21) is robust and mature. Prices from www.bordeaux-undiscovered.co.uk

Glenelly, Lady May Cabernet Sauvignon, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2010 17.5 (91)
£26–£29
Winedirect
May–Elaine de Lencquesaing’s Paulliac heritage shows in this wine, whose smoky-cassis fruit is spiced up by 10% Petit Verdot. Drink 2015–2025 Alc 14.5%

Marjan Simcic, Leonardo, Goriska Brda, Slovenia 2009 18 (93)
£31.95/375ml
Bancroft
Ribolla grapes from 60-year-old vines dried for seven months, fermented to 14% abv with 260g/l sugar remaining and 9g/l acidity, aged for five years in old oak. Superb concentration, energy and depth. Drink 2015–2020 Alc 14%

Sandeman, Quinta do Seixo, Douro, Portugal 2013 17.5 (91)
£30
Hawkhead Wines, Lay & Wheeler, Stur, Vintage Wine & Port
To celebrate Sandeman’s 225th anniversary, Luis Sottomayor chose the best grapes from its Cima Corgo vineyards to create this dense, spicy blend. A future classic. Drink 2020–35 Alc 20.5%