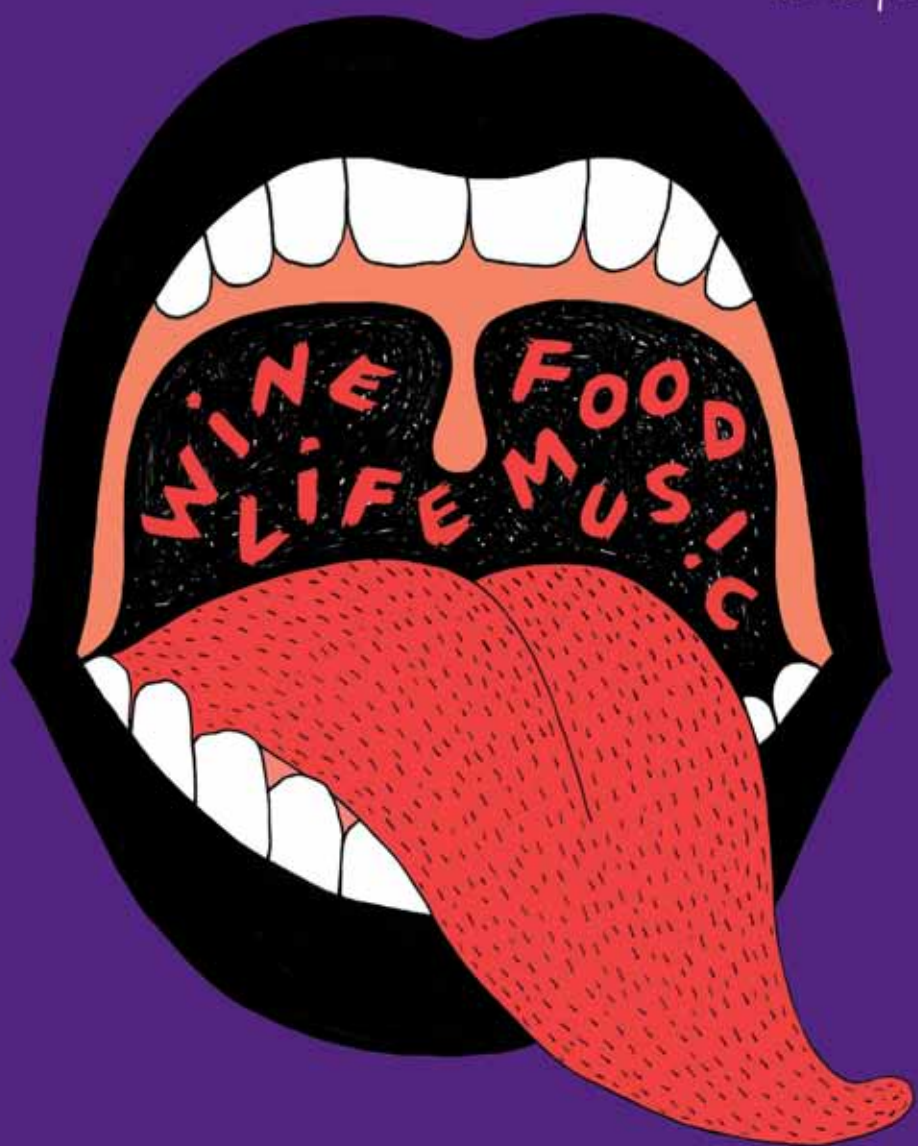


Noble Rot

issue four/k6



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Craig Hawkins. Swartland, SA.

Where the Wild Things Aren't

CRAIG HAWKINS laments the rules holding back South African winemakers.

Winemaking and viticulture in South Africa has come a long way since the first harvest in 1659, the founding of the KWV in 1918 and that very famous day on the 27th of April 1994, when my elder brother could vote for the first time. With the ending of apartheid, the world's doors were suddenly flung open and passports were stamped, as young South Africans travelled to the great wine regions of the world. New techniques, tastes and ideas flooded back into the country and previously well-known winemakers at big co-operatives like KWV and SFW made way for guys like Marc Kent, Eben Sadie, Tom Lubbe and Gotfried Mocke - each with their own unique approach to wine, but all with equal energy and commitment to quality. Winemakers were able to express themselves in more ways than they ever thought possible and individual styles were born out of wider access to foreign wines and travel. South Africa was suddenly thrust into the modern wine world.

Twenty years later and South Africa has gone from strength to strength. The number of wineries has more than tripled since its re-entry into the world wine market in '94 and it is difficult to keep up with the amount of young winemakers and their ideas and ambitions. Some South African winemakers are now realising that less wood, lower alcohol and better farming practices can lead to more 'enlightened' bottles of wine. Exports from South Africa are at an all-

time high and perceptions are beginning to change.

However, despite the number of doors that have been opened, there are more that need to be unlocked. I firmly believe that unleashing what lies behind the door marked CREATIVITY represents South Africa's biggest and most important challenge yet. I'm not talking about forced creativity, as a reaction to modern day trends, but creativity in its purest form. Real creativity makes people around you smile; it forces people to change their own understanding of what they hold as true. I believe creativity is one of the closest things we as humans have to understanding another man's soul. It is what separates us from other animals (that, and beer).

The very first wine I ever made for myself was a 6-week skin macerated white wine (today we'd call it an orange wine), from a 46-year-old Chenin Blanc vineyard on Lammershoek in the Swartland. It was beautiful. I loved it in all ways possible. It had soft tannins, a nose like nothing I had ever smelt before and it looked like liquid gold. I was in love, like any parent would be with their first born. I managed to scrape enough money together to pay for corks and recycled bottles and, with the help of a few family members, I bottled my first wine. I shared a bottle with one of my major mentors, Tom Lubbe, and his first comment upon smelling it was, "Fucking hell Craig, you have a long road ahead of you". He was, in his direct way, referring to how I would struggle to

get my wines through South Africa's rigid certification system, although I didn't fully comprehend what he meant at the time (he had his fair share of run-ins with the wine authorities when he was working in South Africa and this played a major role in him relocating to France - South Africa lost a true game changer). Not being psychic, I struggled to see the future, but I could see the past and learnt that it takes a lot to change minds in a system where no one can point you to the one person in charge.

On my numerous visits to the Wine and Spirit Board's (WSB) Pugh Committee meetings to try and 'justify' my wines for export approval (or any approval for that matter), there has been many a joke shared and I have realised that it is not the people but the systems which are flawed. These systems were good for a time and a place, but now South Africa needs to change and embrace new wine styles at a quicker rate. You cannot have a set of rules that is intended to control commodities such as plastic bottles or Coca Cola, that also provides the red or green light for wines made in a creative way. We cannot wait two years for a new category to be put in place, just so forward thinking winemakers can finally get their wines certified.

Once a wine is bottled it has to be certified analytically (for levels of volatile acidity, chemical compounds etc) and sensorially (for typicity) before you can export it. It is not like many other countries where if it doesn't get the official certification, then it can still be sold internationally as 'uncertified' (i.e. without appellation, vintage etc on the label), although it can still be sold locally as uncertified. Machines do the analytical part and humans the sensorial part, or is it the other way round? Either way, there is a three-strike system before you go to what I like to call 'the place with the big wooden table', where you have to explain your wine and why

it should be exported, to the Pugh Committee chieftains.

The humans must do a good job of analysing my wines as they are always within the legal limits analytically, but the machines seem to be faulty, as sensorially there is always a problem. I used to take it quite personally. Then it became quite entertaining. Now it really is a hindrance to our business. We export 80% of our production from a market that doesn't understand our wine, to markets that do understand but can't access it, as the guys that don't understand it don't want to tarnish the 'image' of South African wine.

We've had our rosé rejected for having "insufficient colour". Now tell me, isn't that precisely what makes a rosé a rosé? The fact that it is a red wine with insufficient colour?! It's ironic how a country that once had its issues with somebody not being light enough, now has issues with something not being dark enough. I even had a wine fail that had never seen any wood (it was aged in a concrete tank) and the reason given was that it had too much woody, vanilla character! I wonder what they would say if I sent a bottle of Bordeaux in? Other favourites are "not cultivar typical", "turbidity" and "foreign wine character".

It would be funny for us too if money was just, as Jordan Belford described it, 'fun coupons'. But there is also a great deal of time involved - each round of tasting incurs a fee and three bottles of wine. There are three rounds (three weeks) before you can justify yourself at the Pugh Committee and, only once certified, are you allowed to export. We currently have four orders that have been waiting to be shipped for the past month, but the wines keep failing. Cash flow hell.

So who are these guys that are supposedly qualified to make these judgements on other people's wine? The tasting panel can be comprised of

anyone who has passed a 'tasting test', where they teach you how to put wine into neat little boxes. Should there be a close dispute over what actually constitutes the colour of a rosé wine, your wine may be elevated to a 'technical panel' of 'experts', so hopefully you can avoid a trip to the terrible wooden table.

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This is not a dig at the tasting panel, but what happens is that they see the same type of wines week-after-week - too big in alcohol/colour/extraction - so when a lighter, less extracted/low sulphur/unfined/unfiltered wine comes along it is immediately given the red light.

Is this exercise that each potentially exportable wine has to endure really protecting 'brand South Africa'? Or, does it make us look like a bunch of southern hemisphere hillbillies? Why can bulk wine, shipped in massive 'flexitanks' and then blended with some plonk from Spain or Italy and bottled off our shores, still represent 'brand South Africa' and end up in supermarkets at £4.99, all the while bearing tasting panel approval?

Is that 'brand South Africa'? Surely our importers, clients and most importantly, consumers, are able to decide for themselves whether they like a certain product or not? If it's rubbish, surely they won't drink it? Open market forces at play, instead of a wine nanny-state. The frustration our importers and clients feel when they cannot access a wine they have ordered is second only to ours in not being able to supply it.

I often wonder why more producers in South Africa haven't teamed up to get rid of this archaic system, to free ourselves of this creativity-stifling stupidity. A group of producers from the 'Swartland Independent' organisation recently met with the WSB, to discuss setting up new categories for our wines to fit into. One for orange wines, one for low sulphur wines, one for rosé coloured rosé etc... The proposal is sitting with the WSB now, but we've been told that the process can take over a year and half. The intention was to allow South Africa to be at the cutting edge of wine production, to keep up with demand for new and exciting products, but at this rate we'll be stuck being the followers. Why not let the creative decisions and the responsibility for the wine lie with the producer, not depend on the governing board's perception of what may or may not be "marketable wines"?

I understand that wines need to be made within certain legal parameters, but my suggestion is to do away with objective tasting panels and let the wines be certified on analysis only. Trust me, winemakers are not going to be producing and bottling vinegar, as it is their reputation on the line and, besides, who would buy it?

Once the doors are open, only then will we truly see this country's potential, as there are lots of young men and women who just want to get on with it. Wine is their fun coupon.