

Reference

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Kym Anderson

University of Adelaide and Australian National University

kym.anderson@adelaide.edu.au

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ROBIN VON HOLDT: *Top 100 South African Wines and Wine Lists, 2012/2013*. Wine Appreciation Guild: San Francisco, 2012, 288 pp., ISBN 978-0620529907, \$24.95.

This book has great aspirations: its purpose, according to Robin von Holdt in the Foreword, is to “de-myth the bunk”, or in other words to replace “the confetti of awards handed out in wine competitions” and the “jargon and small print”; with the opinions of “a panel of the world’s greatest tasters” adept at “professional judging”. Can the book live up to these expectations? Their proof that it can is that “the winning wines are largely sold out!”

Procedurally, it works as follows: there are two judging panels, with wine tasted in categories (whites, reds, etc.), and the whole process is accomplished over five days. There are three judges in each panel with an overall Chair (Tim Atkin MW from the UK). Of the seven judges, three are from the UK, two from South Africa (one a wine maker who was not allowed to judge his own wine) and one each from Sweden and Italy. The tasting protocols include unsighted tasting; the temperature at which the wine is served (red, fortified and port at approximately 19 °C; white, rosé and dessert wines at approximately 13 °C; sparkling wines at approximately 7 °C); tasted both decanted (12 hours red/2 hours white) and from the bottle (15 minutes), with judges made aware of the duplicate wines; judges cannot discuss the wines during tasting; and top scoring wines are tasted up to three times. The purpose of the whole process is to ensure that international best practice is followed, and an audit and good governance report is publicly available.

Wines are entered into the competition, so it is entirely possible that the selection does not actually represent South Africa’s top 100 wines. A total of 366 wines were tasted (down from 390 last year), which represents only a small proportion of the 5000 odd wines available in the retail market in South Africa. Something like a quarter of the red wines entered made the cut into the top 100 (51 of the 100), a third of the white wines, fewer than a fifth of the Méthode Cap Classique, three of the four natural sweet wines and seven of the nine port style wines. The wines are listed alphabetically in the book (i.e. they are not ranked). A quick look at the selection reveals that some of my perennial favorites (Beaumont, Kanonkop, Meerlust,

Uiterwyk–De Waal Wines these days -, Vriesenhof, Waterford) are not represented. Is this because they did not make the cut, or were they just not entered?

Apart from the judging protocol, the front matter includes a resume of each of the judges, a listing of the winners (the top 100 wines) by cultivar and style, and approximate prices for white wines that sell for less than R100 (about \$12 at the current exchange rate) and R120 for red wines. Each entry provides information about the winery, about the grapes, the wine making process and the wine itself (including the alcohol level), and extracts from the judges' comments and the winemaker notes. The judges are evidently fond of higher alcohol wines: only 11 of the 39 whites have an alcohol level of below 13.5% and only 15 of the 51 reds have an alcohol level of below 14.25%. A full 80 of the top 100 wines come off irrigated vineyards.

The last part of the book reports on a "Wine list challenge" where 32 restaurants throughout the country are singled out for their meritorious wine lists. This is followed by some interesting essays on a wide range of wine related topics, some general industry information and maps of the wine producing regions and a glossary of wine terms.

Nick Vink
University of Stellenbosch
nv@sun.ac.za
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ELMARIE SWART AND IZAK SMIT: *The Essential Guide to South African Wines: Terroir and Travel*. Wine Appreciation Guild, San Francisco, 1st ed., 2008 (first published in 2006 by Cheviot Publishing: Cape Town, SA, updated in 2009), 201 pp., ISBN 978-0-620-35500-1, \$29.95.

Authors Elmarie Swart and Izak Smit have produced a 200-page book whose purpose is to provide a one-volume overview of the South African industry with a very specific focus on *terroir*, using the concept of geographical 'pockets' to describe sub-districts of South Africa's Wine of Origin classification of regions.

The book comes in five chapters, starting with an overview of the industry, then the descriptions of the 'pockets', a chapter on wine tasting, one on wine buying, and finally a short chapter on selected aspects of 'local knowledge'.

Chapter 1 (A recent overview of the South African wine industry) contains some useful information that explains the industry in its historical context and in the current context with its focus on social upliftment and environmentally responsible wine production. Most useful, however, is the sections on the unique geographical, climate and grape variety combinations that make up *terroir* in the South African industry, and the description of the timeline as the grapes grow and ripen and become ready for harvesting.