

Cape Wine Masters taste Quality by Design at the Winery of the Year

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Cape Wine Masters and guests were privileged to be able to join Bruwer Raats at his Raats Family Wines tasting room in November; the estate named by Platter's as the 2017 Winery of the Year to enjoy some very special wines.

Bruwer feels his award has been the result of consistency and staying true to his principles, terroir driven wines with simple winemaking. He says he hasn't suddenly found any answers or done anything differently, but he and his small team of seven employees have always produced clean, expressive wines which have taken wine judges a while to appreciate.

Judges appreciated them so much that Platter's awarded Five Stars to eight of his three wine brands. Until now, recognition of the excellence of Bruwer's wines came largely from abroad, with Wine Spectator and Tim Atkins MW frequently bestowing 94points plus on them.

As 2/3rds of any vineyard is below ground, Bruwer believes it is essential to look carefully at the soil. His Original Chenin Blanc sits on two plots of sandstone and dolomite granite and that combination, fermented separately, allows a balance of ripe pear and firm minerality. Sandstone loses minerality in tank so the granite element is key to producing the shape of wine Bruwer wants.

Yes, Bruwer views his wines as shapes. His Original Chenin is pear shape, full and round in the mouth on entry, finishing more focussed and linear – just like the shape of a pear.

The 2016 Old Vine Chenin is richer, fuller, from vines between 40 and 65 years of age and 11 months on lees, blends of whole bunch and barrel ferment with 10% new wood for some, some in steel. Battonage is simple, but effective, Bruwer rolls the barrels; he believes this is more effective as the lees sink down through the wine each time and in reply to a query about the reliability of the bungs says he has special bungs made which tighten into the wood.

Produced in collaboration with his cousin, Gavin Bruwer Slabbert, Bruwer showed his BVintners Haarlem to Hope 2016 white blend and the 2016 Liberte Pinotage. These Five Star wines are very much about the story. The white honours the early settlers from Haarlem who planted Chenin, Sémillon and Muscat de Frontignan and Alexandria here centuries ago. The blend reflects those varieties and Bruwer and Gavin's commitment to terroir and invention, and proved hugely popular. The Pinotage was how Bruwer believes it should be, the product of its parents and made like Pinot Noir. They take low yields grown at altitude

with less extraction – just one punch-down per day and the Cinsault element was evident, liberated Pinotage, indeed.

“Play the ball as it lies”, says Bruwer, referring to his Cabernet Franc 2015. He has no tasting notes or formula for this wine, he plays each vintage as it comes, looking for Loire like suppleness on the nose and Bordeaux structure on the palate. This wine is a railway line; silky tannins and rich fruit cutting a straight line through the palate. Cabernet Franc which is too green and herbaceous is the result of soil which is too fertile, with white elements such as limestone, he feels, Bruwer’s sits on decomposed fragmented dolomite granite

Bruwer is excited about his Eden High Density Single Vineyard Chenin and Cabernet Franc. With good reason. Both got Five Stars, both received 94pts from Tim Atkin MW and Christian Eedes scored the Cabernet Franc 97points. Cape Wine Masters present were unanimous in their praise of both wines. The vineyard took Bruwer 3 ½ years to get right, the Chenin plot covers just 0.6ha and uses for the Chenin the Montpellier clone (the best, says Bruwer) at 8,000 vines per hectare. Bruwer says it is an example to those who say young vineyards can’t make great wine – he got his five Stars with vines just six years old. Irrigation is used as a prevention, done just before the weather dries the soil so that vines have an immunity if necessary, otherwise they are not irrigated. With sometimes just three bunches of fruit per vine and yields as low as 1.7tons/ha the total hovers around 900lts. The Cabernet plot – all 0.2ha of it – has vines individually staked, using clone 214 on Richter 110 (just right, says Bruwer), with just 1 or 2 bunches of grapes on each of the four shoots; it produces just one large barrel of wine!

The evening ended with the eighth Five Star wine, another wine with a story, a collaboration between Bruwer and Mzokhona Mvemve, the MR de Compostella 2015. This wine never has the same varietal make-up (usually Bordeaux varieties) or the same style; it is the best possible of the vintage, determined after hours of selection and blind tasting, amounting to just 600 cases a year.

Bruwer has no intention of broadening his product range, he is focussed on quality, and his Winery success has been long earned. Previously, 90% of visitors to his farm were overseas tourists, now locals are realising what lies inside and the balance has changed. CWM’s were convinced this is deservedly so, and that numbers undoubtedly will increase.