

What are the most difficult winemaking decisions?

By Dave March CWM

Arguably, the most difficult decision a winemaker has to make is when to pick the grapes. Certainly in Europe this is a crucial decision, with the weather being so unpredictable and cruel. Maybe less so in South Africa. And maybe not the most difficult decision.

Less difficult because analysis machines now have so much input into the picking decision, removing much uncertainty about phenolic ripeness and sugar content. Certainly in Germany, for instance, weighing Oechsle (balling) against phenolic ripeness and availability of pickers whilst staring at looming grey clouds must be a daunting prospect, one where the computer printout might be your worst enemy.

It seems, though, that there are more worrisome decisions to make. And not just one, in fact, "so many...that I don't think I could sum them all up", says winemaker at Newton Johnson Vineyards, Gordon Newton Johnson.

Charles Hopkins, Cellarmaster at De Grendel goes back to basics and states the choice of variety as most important and Boela Gerber of Groot Constantia agrees that the key is to get things right at the outset, selecting the right variety, clone and rootstock. "You plant the wrong variety on a particular site, and you'll never make a great wine. If you get it right, making good wine of the grapes of that vineyard will always be easy", says Boela.

But that is not the end of it, Boela says that maintaining the vine every season is vital. Luca Bein of Bein Wine Cellar agrees that vineyard work is crucial, 'starting with timing and style of pruning'. Canopy management, 'has a dramatic impact on the style and quality of the wine', Boela says. Constant attention is required. Gordon Newton Johnson; 'Suckering (removing shoots) too early without sufficiently securing the canopy can rip your vineyard to shreds if a strong wind comes through', and judgement is needed when letting light in to the canopy, especially on your bunches. This is critical for flavour and tannin development. 'Opening up your canopy too much under the harsh African sun can also turn to a negative, especially with heat sensitive Pinot'. Gordon battles with disease prevention decisions, too. Whether to spray against rot is a last resort. Consider Leafroll, sadly too evident in South Africa, says Gordon, 'even if you have a prevention program in place, there are still infected vines that pop up, especially if your neighbour has high infection. Which vines (that you have sweated over for years cultivating) do you pull out? A single infected vine presents a serious danger to the rest. Removing 1% protects the other 99%. Cutting down those vines yourself is a serious lesson in humility'.

Picking still is scary. Says Boela, 'there are so many parameters that one can look at before deciding when to pick. If the winemaker gets his timing right, he can bring out the best of the vineyard. You get it wrong, the wine will always show the greenness of under ripe fruit or jammy character of overripe grapes'. Gordon agrees, 'picking in a hot year means harvest windows become very narrow, as little as a day, when heatwaves start setting in. Picking on

either side of that can skew you from the desired flavour profile dramatically. Underdeveloped, diluted flavour verses dead fruit, lack of freshness, dominating sweet flavour, high alcohols’.

It doesn’t get any easier in the cellar, either, especially with recent harvests. This years was the earliest in twenty years, says Boela, and ‘fast and furious’. ‘Quite a strange harvest’, understates Rianco van Rooyen at Orange River Wine Cellars, his problem is then which grapes receive priority treatment when everything ripens at once, ‘what to do first with a limited team of cellars workers when everything needs to be done at the same time and deciding what to keep for single vineyard wines and what will go to generic wine when up to 300 tons a day of premium vineyards all come in together’. Rianco received 40% of his grapes within two weeks.

Choosing your final cuvee presents a challenge, as well. Being known for a particular varietal or blend doesn’t make things easier, it is a constant decision making process. Gordon finds this one of the most important decisions; ‘tasting each barrel and knowing what each is going to bring to the blend. Tasting each blend over a few days and trying to imagine what it will be like in six months or a year’s time. Not quite there? Starting again and knowing what components to omit. A 1% change can still make a massive difference’.

What about oak aging? ‘The choice of barrels (coopers, size, toasting) is also critical. Barrels will not turn a mediocre wine into a super star, but can elevate a great wine into something really special (or the wrong barrel can overpower the wine, leave an undesirable toasty/bacon kip or dusty character)’, says Boela. ‘One needs to build experience with your cooper and know which style you would like to move to. There are variances each year, even for coopers, so you have to stay on top of your barrels’, agrees Gordon.

The decision list is endless, but maybe less daunting than previously. Margaux Nel, winemaker at Boplaas Family Vineyards, points out that for many winemakers, decisions are no longer in their hands. ‘Many decisions are now made by viticulturists or marketing teams’, the winemaker may have to listen to choices made outside of the cellar. Margaux recalls that at Boplaas Tinta Barocca was chosen in some areas over the superior (in her opinion) Touriga Nacional because it was a softer, easier drinking wine.

Last word, though, to Luca, ‘maybe the most important decision was to enter the world of wine making at all’.