

Sauvignon Blanc – is the SA wine industry missing a trick?

If you have ever been in France late in November, you probably have experienced one of the most successful and enjoyable wine marketing events on the world calendar. I am of course referring to the Beaujolais Nouveau phenomenon. Beaujolais Nouveau is a red wine, made from Gamay grapes, produced in the Beaujolais area, which is part of the Burgundy wine region of France. It is termed a *vin de primeur* as it is served as a young wine – typically fermented for 3 weeks only and bottled within 6 to 8 weeks after harvest. By formal decree of the relevant controlling body, the wines are only released for sale on the third Thursday of November. This enables producers to ship their wines across the world for release and sale on the following weekend. Beaujolais Day (or rather Beaujolais Weekend) is typically accompanied by publicity



events and heavy advertising. Labels are typically colourful and abstract. Posters trumpeting the imminent arrival of the wines line the streets of nearly every city in Europe, America and the Far East. So spectacular is Nouveau's success that *primeur* wines are now produced in other parts of France as well as Italy, Spain and America. Unfortunately, our South

African wine industry has not yet cottoned on to this brilliant idea and I think they are missing a trick for it!

How successful is the Nouveau concept? Nouveau's production is reported as about 25% of all wine produced in Beaujolais. In 2017, nearly 2 000 producers produced 27.5 million cases of which nearly 40% was exported. That production equates to nearly 13% of SA's total wine production in 2017. But it is not only the volumes that speak of success. As a *primeur* wine, production costs are significantly cheaper than other wines. Wines are often shipped in bulk and sold directly to the public at events over Beaujolais weekend – saving more costs. The fact that large volumes are shipped and sold in the initial weeks after release gives a significant cash flow boost to the region. Best of all: these wines are not made to age –they are made for drinking now. That means towards the end of the year there is no more old stock that must be cleared out before the new stock arrives. This is marketing Nirvana!

In South Africa, I believe we can also ride the Nouveau wave with our Sauvignon Blanc wines specifically. In the past decade our Sauvignon Blancs have improved significantly and this has boosted its popularity. Sauvignon Blanc represents nearly

10% of all the wine vineyards in this country. Bearing in mind that the most popular white cultivars (Chenin Blanc and Colombard) are used extensively for production of fortified wines, then vineyard-wise Sauvignon Blanc only ranks behind Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz (according to Top Wine SA). If one further considers that white grapes are typically harvested at higher tonnages than their red counterparts then it is clear that Sauvignon Blanc is top of the pile as far as wine production is concerned. This is amazing for a wine cultivar that has only been planted in earnest in South Africa since around 1976.

I believe the reason why Sauvignon Blanc is so popular in South Africa (and other parts of the world) is that its taste matches our climate perfectly. No other (white) cultivar can produce a wine with the fresh and fruity ‘zing’ that Sauvignon Blanc does – well that’s my opinion in any case. In our hot climate, with a long spring/summer/autumn, it is the perfect wine for any occasion from late morning right through till late evening. To be sure, sauvignon Blanc lends itself to making more complex wines that are aged and wooded. But it is the fresh and fruity wines, made in the *vin de premeur* style, that the market wants and quaffs in such large quantities. Like Beaujolais Nouveau, they are also not wines made to be kept – they are made to be drunk!

It is normally this time of the year that Sauvignon Blanc lovers, like myself, stare forlornly at the empty racks in our wine cellars and we wait.... We wait for news of the first Sauvignon Blanc of the new season to hit the racks. And then the drinking frenzy starts!

At the beginning of the article, I stated that our South African wine industry has not yet cottoned on to the brilliant Nouveau concept and I think they are missing a trick for it. My statement may be true of the industry at large, but there are some clever operators in the market, who I believe have benefitted tremendously from the concept. Take the estate Diemersdal for example. Ten years ago I hardly knew they existed. But since then, they have consistently been the first winery to bring their *primeur* style Sauvignon Blanc to the market. Without any knowledge of their operation, I would venture that their Sauvignon Blanc sales have rocketed over that period? Ten years ago their Sauvignon Blanc would seldom feature on a restaurant wine list in Pretoria – today it



would amount to *harakiri* for the owner if it is not there. I would also venture they are the first major cellar to completely sell-out their stock of the *primeur* style Sauvignon Blanc every year. Does anyone need more convincing? And yes, it is true that over any season, there may be better, more refined and more complex Sauvignon Blancs that reach the shop shelves (such as the other Diemersdal labels) but that is not the point of the Nouveau concept.



Other operators have certainly noticed the success of Diemersdal in this market and in the past few years we have seen an interesting race to get to the market first. In fact, as I write this article I hear a little bird chirping.... But now is the time

that I think the South African wine industry and all the related industries such as hospitality, food and tourism and of course us the wine lovers, can really benefit from our own organised and regulated Sauvignon Blanc Weekend. The possibilities and the opportunities are endless. As a Sauvignon Blanc lover I start to drool at the mere thought what we could enjoy if more of the well-known wine makers in this country join the fray!