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Beware that Bordeaux authority!

Submitted by Tim James on 23 November, 2011 - 22:11

The direct influence of Bordeaux winemakers on South African wine has not been uniformly happy in recent years, though some of it has been great. Mind you, I'm not sure that the influence of Bordeaux winemakers on Bordeaux wine has been totally wonderful either.

But a not uncommon trouble when European winemakers travel to the New World is that they are determined to do the opposite of trying to make Bordeaux-style wines (typically elegant, restrained, at their best). For various reasons I've been thinking about some of these wines recently, and had some email conversations about another of them just today.

I remember a tasting in Cape Town a few years back of some Bordeaux and some Argentinian, South African and other New World wines of the famous bordelais consultant Michel Rolland. Rolland is known for his riper-style, modern Bordeaux (and wrongly sneered at by many people who think themselves classicists but are not always competent to sneer in this case). Well, the Bordeaux wines influenced heavily by Rolland were all extremely good, and the non-Bordeaux wines were mostly pretty grim to most of the tasters present: generally because they were too ripe and overworked.

Rolland is no longer doing much international consultancy, but in those days was involved here at least at Remhoogte and L'Ormarins (now Anthonij Rupert Wines) and Rupert & Rothschild. In my opinion (as I've said before) he set back the Rupert wines by many years, by insisting on over-ripening of the grapes coming from the vineyards which were being brilliantly managed by Rosa Kruger.

What happened in the cellar after the disastrously late picking was also not perfect in many cases; basically, though, the alcoholic power and ultra-ripe flavours and lack of freshness were not attractive. (I would guess that some of the wines originally destined for top brands were de-alcoholised and sold under cheap labels.) Anthonij Rupert wines are now, happily, recovering from this phase now that the influence of Rolland is not paramount. And the last few vintages of R&R Baron Edmund have been vastly better since escaping from the ultra-ripe trap.

That trap seems to have engulfed Capaia too in recent years (though I haven't tasted the latest, unreleased vintages), following the brilliant promise of the first few vintages made under the guidance of Hungarian Tibor Gal, who dies here tragically in a car accident. Capaia subsequently had other problems, connected with management style I'd guess and manifested in an extraordinary turnover of local winemakers.

Another famous bordelais winemaker, Stephan von Neipperg, was taken on as consultant (famous foreign consultants are, rather unfortunately, all-important at Capaia) and, although the results have been confused by the number of winemakers caring, or not sufficiently caring, for the wine, they have not been up to the standard that we might have expected. Certainly the current release, the 2009, is spoilt by the same over-ripeness that marked many of Michel Rolland-influenced wines here.

There a terror of "greenness" it seems. But any vineyard that needs to be picked at such levels of ultra-ripeness to avoid greenness is either planted in the wrong place or badly farmed.

And what a pity when it is automatically assumed that a winemaker from Bordeaux will necessarily achieve greater things than a local. Kanonkop, for example, could have pointed to the folly of such assumptions: no local winery is more local, even specifically



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Afrikaans, and no local Bordeaux blend is better able to challenge the best that Bordeaux can produce.

I also had some worries about Anwilka, the winery owned jointly by Lowell Jooste of Klein Constantia and two Bordeaux luminaries - Bruno Prats (formerly of Chateau Cos d'Estournel) and Hubert de Bouard (Angelus). The early vintages were too youthfully agreeable and easy, in a style far from classic Bordeaux. Again I thought that this was classic vigneron determined to do something patronisingly different in the colonies (as it were) from what they did at home. The 2009 (the first made by a local boy with a great French name, Jean du Plessis) is much more respectable, however, with more structure, proper sternness and elegance than any previous. I think it a very fine wine, and I was very sorry that it didn't get the Platter five stars I thought it deserved this year.



I do wonder, without any certainty, if Morgenster is moving in this direction or the opposite. They have the benefit of advice from one of the great names in modern Bordeaux, Pierre Lurton. But to my taste, nothing has quite been up to the achievement of the maiden 2000 - and the tendency seems increasingly to be towards more softness, and perhaps an over-concentration on the virtues of great ripeness - certainly apparent in the latest vintages of the Italian-variety wines made at Morgenster. In the flagship Bordeaux blend, this might be cause or effect of a wish to use more merlot in the blend than cabernet franc - either way, something of a pity in my opinion.

There are at least two places where it seems to a Bordeaux influence has been unquestionably positive. I believe that Dominic Herbrand is no longer going to be consulting to Constantia Glen (lost along with winemaker Karl Lambour in what I believe was basically a cost-cutting exercise). But he helped increasingly achieve a real finesse in the Constantia Glen Bordeaux blends, that I hope is now entrenched in the approach and will not be lost.

And Glenelly in good old Stellenbosch, owned by Madame de Lencquesaing, grande dame of Bordeaux, former owner of Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande. Her influence - or at least her spirit - surely comes though in the fine wines that Luke O'Cuinnagain is crafting there, among the driest and finest of Cape wines despite unmistakably warm-country power and ripeness. I'm looking forward to another exploratory visit there very shortly, on which I shall report.



The general point is this: we must welcome the influence of Bordeaux when it conduces to finesse and elegance. When the bordelais come convinced that finesse and elegance are impossible here, and that they would rather aim for plush, fruity ultra-ripeness - well, I wish they'd stay at home.

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Submitted by [Kwispedor](#) on 25 November, 2011 - 09:18.

Re: Beware that Bordeaux authority!

Amen. But I do feel that the owners must take the blame, putting the marketing potential of a big name before quality. It must be

Late night sozzled thoughts

- Liking the lesser wines
- A sideways, possibly squiffy, glance at medals and stars

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expensive to get one of those French gurus over here - why not make sure what they plan to do before contracting them? Even better: contractually prohibit them from making wine with higher avb's than 14%. If they can't, perhaps someone with local knowledge would be better suited to the job. There's certainly enough people getting it right, which makes all the rhetorical excuses of the boring overripe perpetrators increasingly fall on deaf ears.

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