



notes on wine

ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW IN AFRICA

“Ex Africa semper aliquid novi.” (“There is always something new from Africa.”), wrote Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder, nearly 2 000 years ago. He could have been talking about South Africa’s current wine market.

South Africans have a choice of over 6 000 wines; a remarkable number, given that we have such a fledgling wine-drinking culture. If our annual per capita consumption remains stagnant, as it has over the past few years, why are local producers continuing to introduce more and more wines to the market?

Anecdotal information from several of the major retail chains suggests that in certain segments of the market, domestic wine sales are on the rise and quite dramatically so. This is not to say we should be questioning the official SA Wine Industry & Information Systems (SAWIS) statistics, which reflect an average per capita consumption of just over seven litres a year. It means we have to look below the surface to capture the real dynamism where it exists.

The major retailers all attest to the ongoing premiumisation trend and report increased sales at the middle- to high-end of the spectrum, reflecting the greater disposable incomes of growing numbers of South Africans, for whom shopping is not just entertainment but an expression of individuality.

In their experience, shoppers are buying more discerningly, prompted by word-of-mouth recommendations, news of awards won on competitive events, high critical ratings and innovative marketing campaigns. They are also extending their repertoires, selecting from a broader range of wine styles.

Misti Watson, marketing manager for Nederburg, which remains South Africa’s biggest selling name in premium wine, despite the advent of so many new brands, says: “High-end consumption is not confined to ostentatious items such as jewellery and cars but includes specialist goods that denote connoisseurship, a refinement of taste and an appreciation for craftsmanship. This applies as much to wine as it does to other alcoholic beverages and consumables. People want to choose from distinctive, new or different

options as a way of saying something about themselves.

“It’s our job as wine marketers to meet those demands with fresh, new and original offerings.”

She warns, however, that no matter how receptive they are to change, consumers find that novelty for its own sake quickly loses it lustre. “To prompt more than a once-off purchase, novelty must be matched with authenticity and offer some perceived value.”

Watson says that for producers to maintain their competitive edge, while asserting brand differentiation, requires real and ongoing innovation to continually enhance intrinsic and extrinsic quality standards. Nederburg, for example, has just launched the first of its top-end, new generation, hand-crafted wines, supported by extensive viticultural and cellar research and the introduction of distinctive packaging with very exclusive cues.

“These are wines that firmly place the brand in the ultra-premium category and they are the culmination of significant investment in infrastructure to advance grape growing and winemaking techniques. Immediately they stand out for being different but their branding makes them familiar and, therefore, a trustworthy choice in an ever-widening landscape of choice.

“We are targeting the ‘epicurious’ and their desire for new sensory experience with a novel taste and look, but underpinning that novelty with established quality, provenance and heritage.”

Packaging detailing is playing an ever-increasing role in building brand credentials, made possible by new advances in technology. Techniques such as high-gloss embossing and debossing, acid-etching and printing directly on to the glass are being applied more frequently by producers wanting to raise shelf visibility and stand out from their competitors.

“A greater range of bottle shapes, glass weight and colours adds to the differentiation, while even outer cartons are receiving far greater attention than previously, as marketers recognise the valuable role they can play in in-store merchandising,” Watson added.