

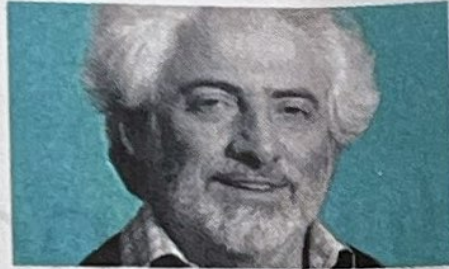
Many treasures to be found among lesser-known winemakers

often wonder what art critics today would have made of Picasso and Modigliani had they been part of the commentariat in Paris in the first decades of the 20th century. Would they have identified the art as the masterpieces we have come to celebrate today?

We know that Picasso bartered some of his best early paintings to settle bar debts and to fend off starvation. Clearly there was no market at the time for works that a century later can fetch more than R3bn.

While I'm not suggesting that every garagiste winemaker is potentially a timeless artist, I do think that sometimes we miss the greatness because of the surrounding noise.

Jancis Robinson and her colleague Tamlyn Currin recently enthused about a number of wines of the (mainly) Cape avant-garde. A significant number of their discoveries are



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not even available in Gauteng. The few that are, can be found only in shops that specialise in the more arcane brands.

Sometimes we need to look further than the mainstream retail outlets, partly to scout out undiscovered treasure, partly to help producers too small to gain access to proper distribution to find a market.

A recent visit to Johannesburg by a troupe of winemakers from the Cape south coast (loosely, that is, Overberg/Walker Bay) revealed many fine wines, and a number that may turn out to be future classics.

Generally, pricing is competitive – they need to pay the rent. I'm guessing that cash flow is the reason that a few of them make *methode ancestrale* fizz (second fermentation in the bottle, with or without disgorgement). These slightly rustic bubbly are succulent, a little cidery, not markedly leesy. Try Lelie van Saron Jade or Maanschiyn Brunch Club – fun and accessible and both selling for less than R200 a bottle.

For something potentially more serious start with chardonnay, perhaps. Van Niekerk Vintners showed a pre-

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release 2023 of great elegance and finesse, made more complex by an appealing textural layering.

Natasha Williams (best known for the wines she made at Bosman's), presented a 2022 chardonnay under the Lelie van Saron label. Made from Upper Hemel-en-Aarde fruit, it is nuanced and finely framed, with notes of lime and grilled hazelnuts.

The chardonnay I liked most was a 2021 from PJ Geyer, who markets his tiny production under the Thamnus label. It had a purity and precision that really sets it apart from most of the other wines of the area, an achievement considering that soil pH and maritime influence there favour a broader style.

This is a wine where the word "crisp" is not a euphemism for "a little thin and lemony". Instead, it showed real intensity, structure and weight, without an ounce of flab – a

Pieter-Steph du Toit kind of chardonnay, worth tackling at around R450 a bottle.

Among the other whites, Maanschiyn's Herbarium delivers a succulence and charm that really impresses: saline, with whiffs of yellow fruit and elderflower. At about R250, it presents better than fair value. I also liked Deep Rooted Wines 2021 Journey to the Centre of the Universe: a blanc fumé made without added sulphur – full, dense and multilayered on the palate.

Among the reds, there were several fine, rather unshowy

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wines. Maanschiyn's Herbarium – a blend of pinotage, syrah and mourvedre – delivers dollops of red fruit together with an easy drinking mouthfeel.

I also liked the Lelie van Saron 2020 syrah, made from Upper Hemel-en-Aarde grapes: broad, savoury and textured, it is altogether more impressive than the sometimes flimsier style we've come to expect from cooler sites.

Finally, young Chris Keet (nephew of the man who put cabernet franc on the map in SA) makes small-batch cabernet franc (naturally) from a number of sites, all under the Weather Report label. As a viticulturist, he gets to see some of the Cape's best parcels.

I liked both the 2020 and 2021 vintages of his Atlas selection. They show the finesse and spice that are the hallmark features of the variety, and at less than R275 a bottle they represent real value.



Time off: Pablo Picasso's no market early on for his wines for lack of knowle