

Hallo Merlot Top 10 Merlot Competition Shows Astute Winemaking and Keen Varietal Expression

Organisers of the first Hallo Merlot Top 10 Merlot Competition could not have wished for a judging panel more in synch with their opinion of the 71 entries judged on 31 May and 1 June 2022 at Vondeling Wine Estate just outside of Paarl.

The team of Cathy van Zyl (Master of Wine), Malu Lambert, Spencer Fondaumiere, Tarryn Vincent and Matthew Copeland were largely on the same wine page of views on the Merlots entered, happy to share their impressions in the tasting room covered in a cloud of red wine perfume and the judges proudly sporting the darkened purple smiles that characterise experts on red days.

Overriding opinions included a sincere impression of the quality of the younger wines entered, those of vintage 2018 and later. Copeland, winemaker at Vondeling, said that the youthful Merlots showed freshness and restrained oak, leading to superb expression of varietal character. “These are the marks of good winemaking and understanding of the variety as well as your site. Red fruit and spice, and very few examples of greenness.”

Vincent, from Reciprocal Wine Company, underscored Copeland’s view saying the flights of older wines made for ‘heavy going’. “The more mature entries were heavy on extraction and the oak shrouded the fruit and varietal character,” she said. “These wines’ dense structures made the brightness of the youthful Merlots more evident, and these were a joy to judge.”

Van Zyl said there were very few ‘bedompig’ wines or ones with a savoury Bovril note. “It was nice to see that the wines intended for early drinking were well-made and in the main showed typicity and character – well done!” On the question of greenness, something that raises its head when talking of South African Merlot, Van Zyl said there were fewer green/pyrazine elements. “Also, very few winemaking faults, so judging by the entries these producers continue to meet the demand for clean wines,” she said.

Lambert enthused on the fine layered tannins and the typical red berry fruit one wants in good Merlot. “This was particularly apparent in the younger wines that showed fine tannins with a lovely juiciness followed by length on the finish,” she said. “We saw good Merlot, with a South African character. This is a classic structure and brilliant varietal expression, with the glow of sunniness for which our country’s Winelands are famous. I think this competition presents an excellent opportunity to hone in on this South African style of Merlot....to highlight it and celebrate it.”

Fondaumiere, who has extensive experience in the on-trade environment, said with the judging these wines it is easy to see why Merlot is so popular with the South African consumer. “There is a gentler, feminine side to the variety that appeals across the board, especially to wine drinkers who are averse to heavy tannins,” he said. “In the well-made younger wines there was a drinkability and accessibility to be had, while astute technical aspects of restraint in wooding and pin-point accuracy in extraction allowed brilliant expression of red fruit and freshness. I tell you, this is a real pleasure judging wines in a category that not only shows excellence but deliciousness as well.”